

John the Baptist: All Stirred Up

The Third Sunday of Advent, 15 December 2019.

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11.

There's a custom in England called Stir Up Sunday that is sort of related to this day.

The collect on the last Sunday before Advent in the Church of England goes like this: Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Since Victorian times, hearing that collect has been the cue to go home and "stir up" a Christmas pudding. A pudding is a steamed cake, not a custard, and it can keep for a long time. The Sunday before Advent is not Thanksgiving weekend there – that's an American thing. And it's not playoff season. That's also an American thing. So it's a good time to be in the kitchen and get some Christmas baking done.

Our prayer book in the Episcopal Church changed the collect for the last Sunday before Advent. We honor the celebration of the Reign of Christ on the final Sunday of the Church Year, so the lessons and collect for that day focus on that hope.

But we still have a Stir Up prayer in the season, and it is today. The third Sunday of Advent. Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.

If you want to take this as a cue to go home and bake cookies or a cake, please feel free. You can bring them to the Wassail Party tonight.

But it is interesting to me that the Episcopal Church's Stir Up prayer falls on the third Sunday in Advent. This is the Sunday when we always hear about the work of John the Baptist, who certainly stirred things up.

John gets introduced on the Second Sunday in Advent. Every year on that Sunday, we hear the words "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." And every year on this Sunday, we hear about his work.

John had stirred up the people to repent and turn to the ways of God. Last Sunday, we heard him preaching and baptizing with such confidence. He declared that one more powerful than he was coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He denounced the religious leaders because their repentance was not sincere. He was ready to take the world by storm. Between that lesson and this one, he baptized Jesus and saw Jesus begin his work.

And even after Jesus started his ministry, John kept stirring things up. He was so bold as to condemn Herod's marriage to his brother's wife. To be fair, John was right. But Herod had the might. Herod put John in prison. In prison, John became quite stirred up himself. He sent his disciples with a haunting question for Jesus. Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

You hear the fear and disappointment and worry from John's prison cell. If Jesus is who I think he is, why am I in prison? What if I poured out my life for the wrong cause? What if I was wrong? Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

John seems to have expected Jesus to be fiery and dramatic. John spoke of an ax at the base of the tree ready to cut it down. He dreamed of one coming who would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. He was ready for a Messiah who would fight battles and let his enemies have it.

Instead, John was the one in prison, not the evil authorities. The chaff wasn't getting burned up. His enemies were not being destroyed. Things were not going the way he expected. So he sent word to Jesus - Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

It took great courage to ask this question. And I sympathize with John's disappointment, for there have been many times in my own life when I've asked similar questions. Maybe you can relate. If you are in one of those angst-ridden times in life, please notice that Jesus did not condemn John. He answered him with dignity and respect. God in Christ can take any question we throw the Divine's way, so do not be afraid to ask and seek and search.

However, I think John's question represents a profound misunderstanding about Jesus. John was supposed to be the one predicted by Isaiah who would prepare the way of the Lord. Instead, in this instance and maybe in others, he is acting more like the prophet Jonah.

You remember Jonah – the guy who got swallowed by a big fish. God told him to preach to the people of Ninevah. Ninevah was the capital of Assyria. The Assyrians had conquered Jonah's people. Jonah did not want to preach to them. He did not want them to repent. So he got on a boat going the other way. A storm came up. The sailors threw him overboard. He got swallowed by the fish. The fish spat him out. He went to Ninevah. The people repented. And Jonah was furious. How could God forgive them.

John seems to have a bit of Jonah's spirit. If Jesus is who I think he is, Herod and the religious leaders should be in prison, not me. The evil powers of this world should be suffering. Something's not right here. Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

So Jesus sent word back to John. Jesus could have come to prison to see him. It would have been risky, but Jesus was known for risky steps. He dropped everything and headed toward Jerusalem when Lazarus died. But here Jesus sent others to speak to John. He sent a community. He wanted John to hear the witness of others.

Blind people receive their sight. Those who are lame walk. People with leprosy are cleansed. Deaf people can hear. Dead people are raised to new life. Poor people have good news brought to them. It sounds like Isaiah's vision of peace and safety for all.

Embedded in this message from Jesus is a bit of reframing he wanted John to embrace. The work of Jesus was not about destroying others, no matter how awful they were. It was about protecting the vulnerable. Jesus was not going to strike the world with an ax. He was going to strike the world with something even more powerful – the power of love and mercy and hope.

It's kind of an offensive idea. It goes against our notions of justice. Shouldn't good be rewarded and bad punished? Jesus offered a third way – healing for everyone.. Jesus did not beat John up for his question. Instead, Jesus invited him to rethink his perspective. "This is how the reign of God works. It unfolds quietly, one person

at a time. It works most actively not among the powerful but among the vulnerable. Don't be embarrassed that you didn't catch on right away. That's just how it is. Blessed are those who aren't offended."

Then he praised John. John is the best that has ever been. Really. He is the greatest. But this is a new day. I have come to announce God's new age of forgiveness and mercy and healing. This new age is better than anything that came before. So the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.

I got to be honest. There have been times, especially in recent days, when I have wished for Jesus to be more like John the Baptist. I wouldn't mind it if Jesus would show up on the scene. Condemn all the nonsense. Tell it like it is. Put certain people in their place.

That's not how Jesus operates, then or now, and thank God for that. Jesus came in love and died rather than fight back and that love changed everything.

A story about Nelson Mandela illustrates the difference. Nelson Mandela died six years ago during Advent. You probably know he spent 27 years in Robben Island Prison. Because he was such a powerful figure, his jailers singled him out for extra harsh treatment. When he was released and elected President of South Africa, he insisted on inviting his jailer to his inauguration. President Clinton asked him, *Didn't you hate them?*. Mandela said, *Yes, but I realized if I hated them I was still their prisoner, and I wanted to be free.*

The way of Jesus sometimes seems weak. It seems like it changes nothing. We sometimes prefer the way of John the Baptist who stirs things up passionately. But John's way can overstimulate the batter, resulting in a dense and chewy cake.

The way of Jesus stirs this world as well, even when you think it doesn't. It stirs the world just enough to mix the ingredients into something completely new and wonderful.

Whether you stir a cake or cookie batter today or not, pray to be stirred up by the love of Jesus that changed everything.

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<https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/uk/christmas/christmas-countdown/a550045/ultimate-stir-up-sunday-when/>

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