

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 5, 2010, dedicated to men, women and children who are living with HIV/AIDS and those battling this disease, and to the Dominican Sisters of Peace who bring hope to the world each day through their ministries of compassion and love, and always to the glory of God!

“Hope Rising from Stumps”

**(Part II of VI in the sermon series
“All Earth is Hopeful”)**

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Every Advent, we must pass by John to get to Jesus. We start out walking through this season following a star to Bethlehem’s stable and right around the second Sunday of Advent we meet a prophet of God is carrying on about our sins, our need for repentance and a brood of vipers who are pretending to be interested in God’s salvation.

He is dressed in camel’s hair with a leather belt, the exact same outfit Elijah wore 800 years before him. His hair and beard are never trimmed. He is skinny like a cactus and prickly, too. He looks like a caveman but we find him knee deep in the Jordan River dunking people for a baptism of repentance of sins.

Every Advent, John the Baptist is the last person in the world most of us want to see. He seriously disrupts our perfect view of Christmas with snow all around and State Auto nativity scenes of the baby Jesus with peace on earth. Some of us in this room have gone to great lengths to avoid John's language and voracity - leaving the churches of our childhoods, running away from (Baptist) preachers, looking the other way when we see signs on the highway that say, *"Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand. Confess your sins or go to . . . ("Cincinnati?"...you know the signs I'm talk about south on US 71?)*.

His message is not one most of us run to hear. Rather, most of us run in the exact opposite direction. Through the years, many of us have felt shamed, scolded, punished, threatened or just plain frightened by John's hell, fire and damnation variety of Christianity.

In recent years, we've seen John's message dressed up with rock bands, ultra screens, skits, praise music and other more palpable ways of presenting judgment. But in the end, we still find ourselves moving to the exits when "heaven" is presented as one dimensional, according to that particular church's views, and "hell" is where others go who don't buy what is being sold as a narrowly defined, one dimensional version of Christian faith. We choose not to receive as "Good News" the Gospel according to John the Baptist because we feel it is a Gospel according to judgment.

But no matter how we run or walk away, dance around it, or, like W.C. Fields, "hedge our bets," there is no getting around or away from John the Baptist. He is here every Advent. And every Advent, John remains God's appointed messenger - the one who has been sent to prepare the way of the Lord. His message is clear. The one whom he foretells is not coming to host a "tea party." Rather, he is coming to chop down the dead wood, separate the wheat from the chaff, cut a path through the wilderness and separate fruit-bearing trees

(and people) from those who give and do nothing for others around them.

John tells us, the one who is coming will judge the world. He is coming to determine who is on the side of life and who is not; who is about the work of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, bringing justice, educating the children and caring for widows and orphans and who is not (based on Matthew 25:31-46).

Even though we may want to run away from John, we find it amazing that people walked through treacherous, mountainous deserts for 20 miles and more to see him and receive his baptism of repentance in the waters of the Jordan River.

Or do we find it so amazing?

After all, we know quite well, as did the people of old, that John was no self-appointed street preacher who set himself on the corner of Broad and High or the Oval at OSU. He was God's chosen prophet - named by the Angel Gabriel and given to Elizabeth and Zechariah for this very purpose. And we know there is a huge difference between self-appointed prophets and the "real deal."

A "real deal" prophet of God is one who points beyond himself to "the one who is more powerful than I." John said it this way: *"The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. . . . His will be an unquenchable fire."* (Matthew 3:11-12) In other words, the Messiah is more fiery, Spirit-led, and powerful than the one people are flocking to see and hear and get soaked by in the streams of living water flowing through the desert! Wow! Talk about a powerful image of Jesus - the one who baptizes with the Spirit and unquenchable fire! John's words serve as an axe that cuts the listener to the stump. His words bring us down to earth. They level the playing field by cutting clean and clear.

Everyone of us gets stumped by John the Baptist.

Not one of us likes to be stumped by a prophet of God or anyone else for that matter. But God's truth spoken in love has a way of cutting us loose from our roots.

Have you been stumped in your life? Have you felt your energy drained, your spirit decimated, your hopes and dreams cut off? Another way of phrasing it might be - have you hit rock bottom and found that you can't get any lower than this? Have you found yourself in an emotional, spiritual or economic hole where you keep blaming everyone and everything around you for all that going wrong? If so, you have been stumped.

Once leveled, we find ourselves still and waiting for that which will bring us hope - in the sprig of new life. But given time, perhaps a season or more of stillness stuck in our stumped reality, we start to listen.

From the prophet Isaiah we hear: *"A green shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump, from his roots a budding branch. The life giving Spirit of God will hover over him, the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding."* (*The Message*, Isaiah 11:1-2)

Out of the stump, hope rises. When we are clean, cut-off, at last we discover our need for God. Down close to the earth, we are humbled - remember the root word "humus" comes from the rich, dark stuff of the earth.

When we are stumped, we know we need God's mercy more than judgment. At ground level, we see what really matters. We discover there is more mercy in our God than there is sin in us. We see that love is stronger than death. We come to know that forgiveness is stronger than sin. We come to know that God meets us in mercy. In mercy, God receives us. We come to know God's love is greater than everything else. In love, God receives us.

So come to the table, all who have been stumped, all who have been humbled and be open to the fire and power of God's Holy Spirit! Come and receive God's forgiveness, God's mercy, God's love and God's grace. All earth is hopeful this second Sunday of Advent. We cannot get around John and his message. So let us come to him and through him receive the spirit of wisdom and understanding known to us in the Messiah of God. Amen.

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