

Sermon: Lunacy, Then and Now
Text: Matthew 3:1-12
Date: December 4, 2016
Context: WWPC
Second Sunday of Advent
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*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,
“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

Matthew 3:1

If you were to hold a national referendum to elect the biggest lunatic in the Bible, there is almost no doubt John the Baptist would win in a landslide.

Granted, there are a couple of other candidates for craziest person in scripture but they just don't have the same name recognition as John. (Who's ever heard of the Gerasene demoniac? Am I right?)

But it's not just name recognition that gives John a leg up on the competition. It's really everything about him. It's his clothes. His food. His location. His tone of voice. His message.

He's so wild and eccentric, is John, such a persistently famous lunatic, that he's become the poster boy for the unhinged set.

Like the guy we've all seen down by the bus stop, the guy who hasn't bathed in a year, with the matted hair and the greasy coat. And the sign board, urging us to repent for the end is near.

But did you ever wonder, what drove John to this point? How did he get into the baptism business of all things? How did it come to be that he took up his preaching post out in the wilderness, surrounded by nothing but rocky hills, scrub brush and the odd pack of roaming jackals? And what about those clothes?

For the guy outside the Greyhound station, mental illness likely is the cause of his strange behavior. He's there because he's homeless. He's homeless because he can't keep a job. And he can't keep a job because he believes the CIA is listening in on his conversations with his colleagues through the fillings in his teeth.

Of course I don't wish for a moment to make light of this man's struggle. Mental illness is real and those who suffer from it deserve our compassion and they deserve treatment. And you know this if you have ever suffered from, say, depression yourself.

It's just that this is not John's story, at least not how I imagine it.

We know he was born to Mary's cousin, Elizabeth. And we know she got pregnant when she was well beyond traditional child bearing years.

John was, in effect, a miracle baby. This we know. What I imagine is that both his parents made sure this fact was not lost on him.

I also suspect that their miracle child carried this designation around less like a weight on his shoulders, and more like an ember that burned hot deep inside him.

Because in his heart of hearts John knew he was born for a reason. He knew that Yahweh had a specific job for him. He just had to figure out what it was.

And so little John grew up a faithful boy, devout if a little too earnest. Eager to go to temple on the Sabbath. Proud to be Jewish, he loved all the traditions of his people, all the customs and practices that made Judea feel like, well, like home.

And then one day all of that changed, almost overnight, when a new regime rolled into town and took control of the levers of power.

They were hard men, and mean-spirited. And they had no love for the Jewish people. All they really loved was power itself. And the riches and privilege that came with it.

At first, like everybody else, John was stunned by this turn of events. And then he grew angry as he watched the victors start to dismantle his homeland and change its customs, change it into something he did not recognize.

And then the anger gave way to something different. It felt like a shadow had descended on Judea. Every day he walked to his job in the shoe factory, turning cow hides into sandals. And every day it felt like the shadow grew deeper.

What he saw was sadness on the faces of his neighbors, and in the eyes of the shop keepers whom he passed on his walk to work. People he'd know all his life suddenly stopped greeting him, like they'd first lost their joy, and then their hope.

He realized it wasn't sadness on their faces and in their eyes. It was resignation. These same people finally decided it's just easier to go with the flow, not put up a fuss, or challenge the hard men who now held the power.

Instead they began to accept the changes to their culture and their country, to adjust to the new normal so they could get on with their lives, even if it meant living in shadow.

It broke John's heart. And in that moment of breaking, something came alive in him. That old ember that glowed faintly deep inside suddenly flared into a bright hot flame. And in its light he could see the way forward. Finally, he knew what he had to do, knew what he had been called to do.

His grandfather was a priest, so John borrowed his tunic and phylactery and headed out into the town square. *Take heart, friends, he proclaimed. All will be well. Yahweh will save us. Messiah is coming! I promise!*

But then Herod's bullies came and put an end to John's preaching. "Quiet dog!" they yelled just before they tore off his tunic and left him with a bloody nose and a cut over his eye.

And that's when he conceived his new plan. He would trade his grandfather's priestly robe for clothes that declared to everyone his true identity. For he was not born to be a priest and to make people feel better. He was born to be a prophet and to tell the truth. The truth that will set people free!

He would head out into the countryside, where resistance movements have always started. Out away from the watchful eyes of the authorities, away from the reach of the bullies who hated him and all Jewish people.

Yes, it seemed foolish when he explained his plan to his friends. "Dude, it's not just foolish," they said. "It's potentially dangerous." But John was undeterred.

So off he went and took up his post by the Jordan river. First just one stray traveler hears him as he's passing through the area, and then another. But his message resonates with them. *Repent, friends. It's time to turn things around. Come out from under the shadow. Let go of your sadness and change your mind. Reclaim your hope. Reclaim your faith. Seize your joy.*

Word spreads. *You gotta go out to hear this guy*, the travelers tell their friends. *He's got something to say, something you need to hear.*

Because here's the thing. John's message of repentance is not a word of judgment. The people of Jerusalem, the people of Judea, of Israel, are not reprobates and sinners. They're God's chosen ones.

But they are now an occupied people. They don't need to be shamed. You know this is true. People don't go out of their way to be yelled at and shamed and guilt-tripped. They need to be liberated and have their hope restored.

John's invitation to turn around is a reminder to his people that they're not born to live in shadow.

It's an exhortation to reclaim their faith, to look beyond the horizon of the way the world is and to see the way it can be, the way it's meant to be. To locate their hope in Yahweh and in Yahweh's Messiah.

It's like a splash of water when you're in the middle of a nightmare. *Wake up!*

It's like a rescue line when you're being swept out to sea. *Turn around! Grab the rope. There's hope.*

It's like striking a match when you're lost in a cave and headed deeper into the darkness. *Hey there, turn around. Come to the light. Don't stay lost. Hope is this way.*

The crowds swell. John's neighbors and friends, those same shopkeepers he passed on his way in to work, now come streaming out of the capital to hear him, to be inspired. To join his insurgency.

To go down into the waters of the Jordan, to get washed in that symbolic river that has always marked the boundary between the wilderness and the promised land, and to come up made clean, to come up reborn, to come up on God's side.

That's how I imagine John found his calling. How he came to be in the baptism business. How he came to find his voice out in the wilderness, speaking as God's own messenger. And how it came to be that crowds streamed out of the capital to hear him, not despite his wacky clothes but because of them.

Maybe this image of John is especially vivid in my mind because this year God sent me my own personal lunatic to call me to repentance, to invite me to turn around and grab the rope.

Her name is Jenny Lawson and she writes a blog called, fittingly, the Bloggess. I call her a lunatic because that's what she calls herself.

In an argument with her mother about some of her more eccentric behaviors, Jenny Googled the word "lunatic" and found it can mean "wildly or giddily foolish". And that was just fine by her. (This example and the quotes below can all be found on thebloggess.com. Advisory: her language is not safe for children.)

And it happens that she is, in fact, a pretty good imitation of John the Baptist. She has appeared in public wearing animal skins -- it's a long story which I won't tell here -- and the home page of her website features a photo of her with curlers in her hair.

It's not hard to imagine Jenny taking a break from her writing, pulling out a box of candied locusts from her desk drawer, then smearing them with a garnish of wild honey. The more serious side of this story is that Jenny is not just wildly giddy. The truth is she is mentally ill, a fact she shares openly with her readers.

She suffers from clinical depression and a cluster of acute anxiety disorders. And because she's so open about her struggles, and because she points a way through darkness to the light, she has garnered thousands of followers on social media.

But make no mistake. Her depression is her own personal wilderness and it's from that wilderness that she brought me a prophetic word that I needed to hear.

Not because I'm depressed but because I'm one who wonders what happened to his country. One who's stunned that I now find myself giving to organizations that fight racism and anti-Semitism not because I want to, not because these are good things to do, but because I now feel like I have to, like it's become a morally urgent necessity.

And because my African American and Jewish friends now feel unsafe in this country they've always called home.

Which is to say I'm one who is struggling to come out from under the shadow that has fallen over this land that I love. And, so, I, too, am one who needs to turn around and reclaim my hope and my joy.

So I'm going to share Jenny's message with you, because you might be one of those people too:

All things considered, the last six months have been a Victorian tragedy. Today [my husband] handed me a letter informing me that another friend had unexpectedly died.

[In light of everything else that's happened] you might think that this would push me over the edge into an irreversible downward spiral of xanax and [Barbara Streisand] songs but no. It's not.

I'm done with sadness, and I don't know what's up with the universe lately but I've HAD IT. I AM GOING TO BE FURIOUSLY HAPPY, OUT OF SHEER SPITE.

Can you hear that? That's me smiling, y'all. I'm smiling so loud you can hear it. I'm going to [remake] the universe with my irrational joy and I will spew forth pictures of [tiny] kittens and baby puppies adopted by raccoons and NEWBORN LLAMAS DIPPED IN GLITTER

*In fact, I'm starting a whole movement. The #FURIOUSLYHAPPY movement. And it's going to be awesome because first of all, **we're all going to be VEHEMENTLY happy**, and secondly because it will freak out of everyone that hates you because those [meanies] don't want to see you even vaguely amused, much less furiously happy and it will make their world turn a little sideways and will probably scare them.*

Which will make you even more happy. Legitimately. Then the world tips in our favor. Us: 1. Meanies: 8,000,000.

That score doesn't look as satisfying as it should because they have a bit of a head-start. Except you know what? [Disregard] that. We're starting from scratch. Us: 1. Meanies: 0.

The really crucial part of this prophetic declaration? Jenny Lawson did not write this piece last week, or on November 9th. She wrote it in 2010.

Because sometimes life can just flat feel like a hissing blowtorch, pointed right at you. Because there is no guarantee in the Bible or in the Constitution that life is going to be all sunshine and roses.

No guarantee that we're going to get the leaders we want, or the country we dream of. Or that our efforts to remake the world as we believe God intends for it to be won't occasionally end in heartbreak and defeat.

The hard news is we just have to live with that uncertainty. But here is the good news, and the thing we know for sure: defeat never has the last word in God's story.

Which is why God sends the prophets to prepare the way of the Lord, to prepare the way for the coming of light and hope and peace and justice in the real world in which we live.

And so we always have the opportunity to respond to John's invitation, to join heaven's insurgency, and to wage peace like a bunch of lunatics.

So this Advent season I invite you to heed Jenny's prophetic word because another word for *furiously happy* is joy. And because as we know from the Christmas story that joy is our birthright and our gift to reclaim when we've lost it.

Yes, in the days and weeks and months to come I also invite you to follow John's lead and be truth tellers in your own right. I urge you to call out racism and anti-Semitism when you hear it and see it because that's part of the program, too.

In the passage I read earlier, John invites the people of Jerusalem to repent but just a little later, the scribes and the Pharisees arrive. We don't know this for sure, but it's likely they have come to shut him down; likely that, under this new regime, they have succumbed to the seductions of money and privilege.

And so John calls them out, calls them as he sees them: *You brood of vipers. You deserve God's judgment, not these good folks.*

So when commentators on CNN use the N word and when they openly question whether Jews are people, I invite you to flood their phone lines with your outrage.

But I also want you to go to Christmas parties and enjoy holiday concerts with your spouse or your mother, and to plant spring bulbs in your garden.

When hate crimes occur in your community, take a stand. Call them out yourself. Or if that feels unsafe, call the Anti-Defamation League or the Southern Poverty Law Center or WLOS News and report them.

And then make Christmas cookies with your granddaughter, and deliver some of those cookies to your homebound neighbor. Then pop in a Christmas CD and sing Joy to World, the Lord is Come. No more let sins and sorrows grow!

If you're looking for a place to join this movement, you can start right here. I regret to report that a spate of hate crimes has occurred right here on the campus of Warren Wilson College. The college is already doing a lot to follow up on and respond to these incidents. But this is why we hung our **Love Above All** banner back outside the Chapel.

That's not all we're going to do. On Wednesday night we're going to gather in the Fellowship Hall and we're going to sing our favorite Christmas carols and we're going to enjoy some homemade cookies and some hot cider. And we are going to celebrate this season with eyes and hearts open wide.

And then, weather permitting, we're going to take our music and our joy and our love and some cookies out into the darkness and we're going to sing carols and songs of love and peace in the courtyards around campus.

We are going to be wildly and giddily foolish. We are going to be furiously happy. And in the contest between love and hate, between fear and hope, between resignation and joy, we are going to run up the score, and we're not ever going to stop.

Because as people of Advent, people who prepare for the coming of the Light, that's who we are. And that's how we roll.

Amen!