

Sermon for Advent 2 Year C

[RCL] **Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 4 or 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6**

I'm reading a book right now by a person who really irritates me. I'm not sure that is the right description. She bothers me; she gets under my skin; she makes me cringe. I'm actually surprised that I'm even reading the book. I've never met her but I saw her at a conference once. I thought she was pushy and obnoxious. She interrupted people. She talked over people. She made off-hand comments that I thought were inappropriate. So when, for a variety of reasons, I had to read this person's book, I thought to myself, "Oh great, this is going to be like listening to finger nails on a chalk board."

And in some ways it has been a grating experience. Her writing is not really my style. She speaks in broad generalizations. She makes bold pronouncements about people and their spiritual lives. Her confidence can sound like superiority.

But here is the thing that caught me completely off guard: she is often right about what she is saying. I got to one section on the ways in which our spiritual lives are out of balance, and I had to put the book down. This person I had thought of as an obnoxious know-it-all had hit the nail on the head. She actually just knew. She was describing many of the ways in which my life was out of balance. I didn't particularly care for the source or for the way she said it but I had to acknowledge a hard truth: my life is often out of balance and she made me confront this hard truth about myself.

Here's the part that got me. She said,

"With the invention of the light bulb, balance became a myth. Now human beings could extend the day and deny the night. Now human beings could break the natural rhythm of work and rest and sleep. Now human beings could begin to destroy the framework of life and turn it into one eternal day, with, ironically, no time for family, no time for reading, no time for prayer, no time for privacy, no time for silence, no time for time . . . Our time gets totally out of balance. We spend it all on friends, or we spend none of it there. We spend it all on work, or we spend it all on our compulsions. We spend it all on the body, or we spend none of it on the body. We spend it all talking, or we spend none of it talking . . . We wake up one day and realize we haven't heard from old friends for years; we haven't been to see our ageing relatives for months; we don't know the names of our cousins' children anymore; we haven't written a personal letter for years; we haven't sat in a large easy chair and read a good novel for ages . . . and life is flying by. All skewed."¹

Ouch. This hurts. I still don't like the way she puts things. But, if I'm honest, I have to admit, she is pointing out a hard truth. About myself. About the way I spend my time. About the way life seems to be flying by. It's a hard thing to hear, but it is true. I can't get out of it by saying I don't like the person who says these things or the way she says them. If I'm really honest I have to admit it: "she has got my number."

We are in Advent, now, and that means we are in the time of the Church year when we get to meet another person who may really irritate us: John the Baptist. When it comes to people's lists of favorite saints, I don't think John the Baptist would be at the top of anyone's. St. Francis, maybe, with love of animals and creation. Peter, whose hard-headedness is sort of endearing or can make us feel like geniuses compared with him. But, as I said, not many people really like John the Baptist. He's an unsettling Old Testament type of prophet who comes on the scene proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Talk about spoiling the Christmas mood. We wouldn't want to invite John to our holiday parties. He would seem an obnoxious and self-righteous intruder in the midst of our holiday cheer.

And yet, the Church says every year, we need to hear John the Baptist's message because the season of Advent is not the season of Christmas. It doesn't matter that in our contemporary culture we start celebrating Christmas right after Thanksgiving, with its relentless marketing and endless soundtrack of carols. In the Church year, it is Advent, and that means we have to confront John the Baptist. Bah, humbug. Right?

But here's the point: as irritating as John the Baptist may be, as much as he may get under our skin, he has an important message for us. At least, that is what the Church is saying. It is saying that before we rush to the joy of Christmas, before we receive the great mystery of God with us, we have to prepare for this event through a time of self-examination and penitence. That is, we need to set aside some time to examine our spiritual lives, to look with utmost honesty at all the ways our lives are out of balance, to look at all the ways we are involved in self-destructive behaviors, and to try clean out the spiritual trash, to try bring about some harmony in ourselves and in our world. As John says, quoting the prophet Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low. The winding roads shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." So in Advent, we hear John's message as an invitation to spiritual reflection. Just as we might clean our house in preparation for a special guest, so the Church asks us to take stock of our souls and to be at our best when the special day arrives.

The writer who got under my skin, who got me thinking about John the Baptist and self-examination, is a religious writer named Joan Chittister and the book I am reading is on Benedictine spirituality titled, *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily*. Benedictine spirituality, which has had a great influence on the Anglican tradition, is a spirituality of balance and harmony and wholeness. Benedict is saying that all facets of our daily lives can be holy and sacred: what is needed is to bring all these things into harmony: a balance of work and prayer and study and leisure and service. As Chittister says, our time:

"was to be spent on listening to the Word, on study, on making life better for others, and on community building. It was public as well as private; it was private as well as public. It was balanced . . . No one thing got exaggerated out of all proportion to the other dimensions of life. No one thing absorbed the human spirit to the exclusion of every other. Life was made up of many facets and only together did they form a whole."ⁱⁱ

And then, after she lays out this beautiful ideal of spiritual harmony and balance, she lets us have it. Like John the Baptist, she starts pointing out all the ways in which our lives are out of

balance these days. Here she is on our tendency to slump in front of the TV at the end of the day rather than to do something that truly feeds our souls:

“We all tell ourselves that things are just too hectic, that what we really need is play, not holy leisure. We all say we’ll do better tomorrow and then do not. We all say that the schedule is too crowded and the children are too noisy and the exhaustion is too deep. But, if we do nothing to change it, the schedule just gets worse and the noise gets more unrelenting and the fatigue goes deeper into the bone. The fact is that it is our souls, not our bodies, that are tired. The fact is that we are so over-stimulated and so under-energized that the same old things stay simply the same old things, always.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Easier just to slump in front of the TV and delude ourselves by saying that tomorrow will somehow be different.

Like I said, “Ouch”! Who really wants to hear this? But, is it true? Are our lives really out of balance? Do we need to confront this hard truth about ourselves?

Here’s the good news, here’s the hope: we can get our lives back into harmony and balance. And here’s even better news, it doesn’t call for extraordinary feats of spiritual gymnastics. Benedictine spirituality, Anglican spirituality, is not saying that you should add more things, super-spiritual things, to your “to-do” list. Rather, it’s saying that you can and should rethink your whole list. Here is how Chittister puts it:

“people with a sense of Benedictine balance see that life is a medley of multiple dimensions, each of which must be developed. They have become more than either their work or their play. Nothing consumes them and everything taps something new in them. They walk through life smelling the flowers. They need enough money, some play, good work, steady friends, spiritual growth, intellectual stimulation, and harmony with nature . . . they make time for every facet of life. They live a rhythm of life that includes the natural, the spiritual, the social, the productive, the physical, and the personal. They can tell you each week what they have done in each area. They live life well. They are in fact fully alive.”^{iv}

That sounds like a pretty good vision of spiritual wholeness and balance. Actually, that sounds like a classically Anglican vision of spiritual wholeness and balance. In any event, it sounds like something many people are longing for these days.

The hard truth is that for many of us our lives are out of balance. Perhaps that’s why we need people whose style we find grating to point this out for us. Perhaps that’s why we need confront John the Baptist every Advent. If we are to prepare for the coming of the Lord, we need to spend some time examining our lives and trying to get things in order. The painful truth is that life feels out of balance for many of us today. The promise and the hope, however, is that we can do something about it. We can change, and we can find a rhythm of life that makes time for every facet of our lives. Through humility and prayer and study we can move to a greater sense of wholeness and harmony in our lives. Advent is a holy season set aside for this type of spiritual reflection. The really amazing news is that even as we engage in this process of seeking

wholeness and balance in our lives, we are also preparing for the greatest of all spiritual gifts: the gift of God coming into our lives once again at Christmas.

Amen.

ⁱ Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily: Living the Rule of St Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperOne Reprint Edition, 2009), 75-76.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 74.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 106.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 77.

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