

WE ARE JOHN THE BAPTIZER

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The Second Sunday of Advent

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There is starting to be a different way of thinking about the pandemic, at least in my observation. It is very difficult to say out loud, but it is very important to do so, because I have heard it expressed enough in recent days to think that many of us may be carrying it unconsciously. It is certainly influenced by the appearance of the Omicron variant. It involves a move from thinking about *when* the pandemic will end to *if* it will end. There is the thought that this virus is utterly unique in the speed and degree with which it mutates. At its most extreme, it goes to the thought that there could eventually be a variant that is so transmissible and virulent as to be unstoppable: a variant that would wipe us out.

Let me hasten to say that I personally do not see this as the trajectory we are on. In fact, there is some reason for optimism about Omicron, in that early observations are that it may not be a virulent strain and sometimes mutation towards less virulence is the way viral pandemics end. Virologists explain that viruses “want to live,” so they want bodies to live in. Deaths do not benefit the virus; it “wants” to become established in populations and become *endemic* rather than *pandemic*. This is a common pattern of which there are numerous examples (Center for Planetary Health and Security, November 30, 2021).

Still ... the changing psychology I described regarding the pandemic seems to be present in our collective unconscious experience. There is the fear that it will never end, and that it may overwhelm humanity’s capacity to sustain itself. So, what does our faith have to say to us about this? And what, in particular, does John the Baptizer have to say?

Listen again: “[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:3) There was a long tradition in Judaism of ritual washing. It continues today with the *miqvah*, the ritual bath used each month by Orthodox Jewish women, and by men and women on certain other occasions. The *miqvah* restores ritual purity, and the understanding is that this is something that needs to be repeated regularly.

But John’s baptism is something different: it is *a* baptism for the forgiveness of sins, a one-time washing. It confers not ritual purity, but moral transformation. Amy-Jill Levine compares it to responding to an altar call: committing once and for all to a new way of life. (Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 83) For John the Baptizer, this new way of life was a life that was ready for the end of the world as it had been, and the advent of a new creation: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be laid low ... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:5ab,6) To be baptized by John meant that a person had faith that this ending of the old and beginning of the new was imminent.

And remember that for John this ending of the old was an entirely good thing. This is where John offers us something essential as the Church of Jesus Christ. Contemporary humans are obsessed with the idea of control. The pandemic threatens this obsession on the deepest possible level. The idea that it may never end undoes us because it would mean that an out-of-control reality would become permanent.

Now, let me say again that I expect that this pandemic will end, and I hope that it does. But the idea that we can be restored to a state of controlling our environment while resuming life as it was “pre-pandemic” is a fantasy, and I hope that the pandemic is teaching us that. The only certainty we can

have about the world is that God made it the way God made it, and if we live lives that contaminate and destroy nature the eventual outcome is entirely predictable. John's baptism required complete submission to the will of God and abdication of the fantasy of control. If we, the Church of Jesus Christ, can embrace this baptism for ourselves and offer it to the world--if we can in a sense *be* John the Baptizer for the world today--we will be listening to today's Gospel.

For us, then, listening to today's Gospel means that we are prepared to live--and in fact *choosing* to live--in hope for something deeper and more lasting than the end of the pandemic. We live in hope not that we may control the world for our own purposes, but instead for two deeply counter-cultural things. First, we live in hope that while we are waiting for God's New Creation, we can live our lives in harmony with the Creation we live in now. And second, we live in hope that we will see God's New Creation. We as the Church say to the world, God is going to make a new thing and this is something to look forward to, not something to fear.

The amazing Anglican priest, theologian, mathematician, and physicist John Polkinghorne, in his book *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (with Michael Welker, Trinity Press, 2000), offered a way for us to think about this that can be very useful for our own spirituality. Polkinghorne, writing of the relationship between this world and the world to come, says that "the continuity between the two worlds can be expected to be expressed in a carryover of pattern." (p.39) So, for example, in the ultimate example of God making a new thing--the Resurrection of Jesus--Jesus' resurrected body is recognizably a body, not something altogether new. There is discontinuity but also continuity (p. 38 ff.); the pattern carries over.

So, if we are living *now*, in this Creation, in a way that is in keeping with its true pattern--how the world is made, so to speak--we are preparing ourselves well for the new thing that is coming. It will be transformed, but recognizable to us. The same, only better! Nothing to fear, but only something to long for.

Working on this sermon has helped me to understand better why I have always been especially moved by words from a verse in the Christmas hymn, *Once in Royal David's City*: "For he is our childhood's pattern." The words capture the essence of what a true Advent hope is about. If Jesus is the pattern by which each of us seeks to live, we will live in a way that anticipates now what the New Creation will be like. So, let us indeed pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic. But let us not hope for a return to life as it was. Formed in the pattern of Jesus, we hope for a world in which we humans no longer recklessly plunder and destroy God's Creation, no longer hate and oppress others in the service of our greed, no longer deny the evil promotion of untruth and polarization. Let's be John the Baptizer to the world, shall we? We'll have to live very differently than we have; but then really, how well is it going for the world the way things have been?

Come, Lord Jesus!