

Gary Harder, Dec. 8, 2013

“An irrational season with its profits and prophets”

Texts: Luke 1:5-20.

Matthew 3:1-12

Introduction

Madeline L’Engle calls Christmas the “irrational season”. She writes,

“This is the irrational season

When love blooms bright and wild;

Had Mary been filled with reason

There’d have been no room for the child.”

Christmas does seem to defy reason. Said in another way, the Christmas message moves beyond reason. It is about a virgin who gives birth and angels who serenade shepherds.

Canadian writer Northrop Frye wrote, “If I had been out on the hills of Bethlehem on the night of the birth of Christ, I think that I should not have heard any angels singing. The reason why I think so is that I do not hear them now, and there is no reason to suppose that they have stopped. There is no reason to suppose that they have stopped singing, though I do not hear them.”

No, the angels have probably not stopped singing their Gloria’s, but mostly most of us don’t hear them. It is far too irrational. We don’t expect to hear angels. And we don’t expect songs of joy in a world mostly in disarray, despair, hopelessness and violence. How can one even expect Gloria’s at all in the Philippines, or in Syria, or in Toronto for that matter?

Or in the world into which Jesus was born? It was an absolutely grim time there under Roman occupation. It is amazing that shepherds could hear any strains at all of “Glory to God in the highest.”

There is something very irrational about Christmas, both in its message and in our response to it. A message of incarnation? God becoming human in the form of a baby? Doesn’t easily make sense. God – all powerful God – gives up control and lets The Son – God’s Son – come to messy earth in the form of a helpless and vulnerable baby? Doesn’t sound very rational at all.

Maybe the only rational thing about Christmas is how our culture responds to it. The commercialization of the season makes a great deal of sense. Huge profits are to be made from it. The hard sell is very rational. And the subsequent trivialization of the deeper meaning of Incarnation also make a lot of sense. Our culture in this season is mostly into feel good sentimentality – as long as a profit can be made of it.

But those of us who really want to engage the story of incarnation on a deeper level have to essentially walk a counter-cultural journey. We essentially have to claw our way through layers of cultural trivia and escapism and the all-pervasive “musac”. It is very irrational, isn’t it, to commit ourselves to following the one whose life took him to a cross?

And then we have the story of John the Baptist, the irrational prophet. We look more closely at his story.

John the Baptist

Ah, the baby Johnny grew up – and who could have known what the adult version would look like. The cute baby became a – well – became a desert hermit breathing thunder and telling people off, calling them a brood of vipers. His most over-used word was “repent”.

His parents were really too old to have a baby. And when the angel (what is it about angels anyway) – when the angel told old Zechariah there in the holiest of holies in the temple that his wife Elizabeth would bear a child he snorted in disbelief. Way too irrational. And, since he couldn’t believe the message, he lost his power of speech. Couldn’t say a word. But then the miracle did happen, and way past child-bearing age, Elizabeth did become pregnant, and the old couple was ecstatic. But no shouts of joy at all from Zechariah. He still couldn’t utter a sound. Absolutely mute. Not even a peep will come out of his mouth, no matter how exuberant his dancing.

When their son was born everyone in the village starts celebrating – celebrating the miracle of it all, celebrating the miracle of old Elizabeth having a child, and celebrating the beautiful baby the parents brought to the synagogue on the eighth day to circumcise him and to name him and to bless him (Sort of like we do at a parent-child dedication ceremony. No, not the circumcision bit, but surely the blessing). And then there is that great moment – the naming of the baby. The name? No mystery here. That is already determined. Of course he will be named Zechariah, after his daddy.

But his mother says (the mother says because the father can’t, he is still mute), the mother says “Hold it, we’ve decided on the name John”. And now everyone else is dumbfounded (pardon the pun). They are aghast. “But what is wrong with the name Zechariah”, they all shout at once. There isn’t a John to be found in the whole family tree. Better check with the father again just to make sure this isn’t some terrible mistake. So father Zechariah, still voiceless, takes a writing tablet and writes on it the name of his son. There it is on papyrus. John. His name is John. And suddenly Zechariah regains his speech, and bursts out with a long poetic vision speech about what this son will one day become. And there is already a hint in that speech about what his son, as a thirty year old, will be doing and saying.

“And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of the their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us...” (Luke 1:76-78).

30 years later. We tune into the story 30 years down the road.

This cute kid grows up – grows up to become – well, a desert hermit. Mark describes him this way. “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1:6). I kind of picture him with waist long tangled hair, a long, unkempt beard, fiery eyes, and a total inability to make small talk. Luke tells us that this John the Baptist “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3:3)

How jarring. How rude. People are going about their ordinary lives, coping as best they can, trying to live decently, going to the synagogue occasionally, even sometimes giving alms to the poor, and saying their morning prayers, and raising their children the best they can, and not fighting with their neighbors too much, and they hear about this prophetic character out in the wilderness and go to check him out – and get a broadside right between the eyes.

“You brood of vipers”, John yells at them. “Repent of your sins. Be baptized as a sign that you have repented and found forgiveness”.

“But John, haven’t you got it all wrong”, comes the protest. Our big problem is not ourselves – it’s the Romans. We are under the thumb of Rome. Can’t breathe any freedom air at all. We need a Messiah who will help us drive out the Roman army. And you tell us is to look inside ourselves and repent. You are way off the track John. And then you tell us yet to look to Jesus – a Jesus who doesn’t lift a finger against the Romans, much less raise an army to drive them out”.

Ah yes, this John the hermit looks into the hearts of ordinary people and sees the emptiness and disillusionment and despair there, and surely not all of that has to do with their brutal Roman masters. Now to be fair, John does also confront Herod, the Jewish King subject to Caesar. Something about rebuking Herod for his adultery with Herodias, his half-brother Philip’s wife. And when Herodias’s daughter Solome danced so provocatively before Herod, and then asked for John’s head on a platter as a reward, John did lose his head.

But that was later. Now he is preaching repentance. Repentance (from the Greek word Metanoia). Repentance literally means to change direction, to turn around. You are going in one direction and you need to turn around and go in another direction. You need to turn yourself around to face toward God, your true home. Let go of your helplessness and your hopelessness and your cynicism and your despair and your blaming everything and everyone but yourself for your emptiness.

And when the crowds ask John, “What shall we then do”, John becomes very practical - at least according to Luke. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise”. And when tax collectors asked him what they should do he said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you”. And to the soldiers he said, “Do not exhort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages”. (Luke 3:10-14).

Turning around means turning toward compassionate living. So John can be very, very practical about what repentance means.

But it is the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees that get the brunt of his wrath. They come to be baptized by him, but John is not impressed by their motives. “You brood of Vipers” he yells at them. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come”? He accuses them of trusting in their ancestry for their salvation. Being children of Abraham is not enough. “Baptism is based on repentance, not lineage”, he shouts at them.

Then John quickly moves the focus away from himself to Jesus. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but 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 with fire”.

Jesus will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire? In one sense this did happen at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descended on those 3000 people gathered to hear Peter preach, and descended “like tongues of flame”. But I suspect that John had more “judgement” in mind – end times judgment. Unquenchable fire kind of judgment. “His winnowing fork is in his hand”, John says of Jesus, “and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Later, when John is in prison for confronting Herod, he finally sends two of his disciples to Jesus with a question. “Are you really the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another”? A question based on doubt. He is in prison. And he doesn’t see the judgment he had proclaimed. He doesn’t see the fire destroying the wicked. And so he starts doubting his own message. And so he asks, “Are you really the one who is to come? Or did I make a mistake?”

Jesus responds so simply, so compassionately. Luke recounts that Jesus had just cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell my friend John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them...” (Luke 7:18-23).

You can almost hear the subtext. “John, dear friend, I am not first of all about the kind of judgment you proclaimed. I am about good news, about healing, about new life. You have prepared well for my ministry. But don’t get stuck on the fire of judgment stuff. Judgment is what happens inside a person when they discover there is a new way, a love inspired way”. Repentance is to turn towards God and God’s love and God’s compassion and God’s forgiveness and God’s healing.

Conclusion

In this irrational season we would do well to embrace the theme of repentance preached by John. Repentance as in turning – turning away from a culture that celebrates materialism and consumerism, celebrates violence, celebrates instant gratification, celebrates individualism, celebrates impersonal communication. Turn away from the gods of despair and cynicism and judgment. Turn more fully to the God of life, of love, of hope, of forgiveness, of healed relationships, of new life.

This week the world has mourned the death of Nelson Mandela. He began his attack on apartheid breathing judgment and violence. He saw no other way to destroy its evil. Somehow, in his 27 years in an absolutely brutal prison he repented – he turned to a new direction. He came out of prison breathing reconciliation and forgiveness instead of revenge – and essentially destroyed apartheid with love. How could he forgive what had been done to him and done to his people for 300 years? It is unfathomable. It is irrational. But he was able to persuade an entrenched evil system to repent. South Africa turned to a new direction. Violence and revenge could not do it. Forgiveness and reconciliation did.

There is an awesome power in what John the Baptist preached, and in what Jesus, born in a stable, lived out and which Nelson Mandela modelled. And if we turn fully to embrace that way of forgiveness and reconciliation and love, maybe, just maybe, in our repentance we will hear the angels sing their alleluias.