

December 4, 2022
Second Sunday of Advent, Year A
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

You almost certainly know the “St. Francis Prayer.” It begins with this: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” Last week my social media feed offered up something called the “Reverse St. Francis Prayer.” The author is said to be unknown. It begins with this line: “Lord, make me a channel of your disturbance.” After reading only that much, first I felt convicted, and then I thought of John the Baptist. The full “Reverse St. Francis Prayer” goes like this:

Lord, make me a channel of your disturbance.
Where there is apathy, let me provoke,
Where there is silence, may I be a voice.
Where there is too much comfort, and too little action,
Grant disruption.
Where there are doors closed and hearts locked,
Grant me the willingness to listen.
When laws dictate and pain is overlooked,
Grant me the willingness to listen.
When tradition speaks louder than need,
Grant me the willingness to listen.
Disturb us, O Lord, Teach us to be radical.
Grant that I may seek rather to do justice than to talk about it;
To be with as well as for the poor;
To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;
To touch the passion of Jesus in the Pain of those we meet;
To accept responsibility to be church.
Lord, make me a channel of your disturbance.¹

On the church calendar, today is the Second Sunday of Advent, though it would also be fitting to call this John the Baptist Sunday. On this Sunday every year, we hear the voice of John calling from the wilderness. This year it's courtesy the Gospel of Matthew, though John the Baptist appears in each of the four canonical gospels. Each gospel describes its own particular account of Jesus; in doing so, each gospel details its own particular account of John. The four gospels have differing agendas but nonetheless concur on some key points where John is concerned: John is a wilderness ascetic; he's doing a rite of water baptism; he's a great prophet anticipating an even greater messiah; keeping that in mind, people better clean up their acts.

At this point in the Gospel, John has been preaching clean-up, while Jesus has been walking around incognito, at least when it comes to his status as God and Savior. You could say that Jesus has been in the closet, but he's about to come out. His coming out will start with the exchange between John and Jesus that was cued up by today's reading. At that point we will realize that John will have practiced what he preached, making a straight path for our bent Jesus to be revealed.

I typed the word *bent* into that sentence and then wondered whether I ought to use it here. Bent, being not straight, is a colloquialism, though not a common one, for gay or queer. It's a word risky for a preacher to apply to Jesus. But I did a quick Google search and found as synonyms for bent the words twisted, crooked, warped, contorted, deformed, and misshapen.

Twisted, crooked, warped, contorted, deformed, and misshapen ... those are words that are kind of harsh. I started to ponder that, and an image popped into my mind. It's from a long-ago trip to Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in western Colorado. Along the rim of the canyon live these strikingly beautiful juniper trees. They're very old but not very large, because the growing conditions are so very harsh. Their trunks are curved and twisted. Their roots seem to be sunk into solid rock.

Those juniper trees are beautiful not because they're straight, but because they're bent: twisted, crooked, warped, contorted, deformed, and misshapen. They're bent, and they're beautiful because of it. Maybe every human is at least a little like that: bent, and beautiful because of it. We are carriers of the divine presence in a world that will shape us with joy and with sorrow and everything in between. We possess a beauty to which our false-perfection-seeking culture would make us blind. Maybe that's why we have to follow John into the wilderness, to shed both the criticisms and the false trappings we take on as armor. If we can see the beauty of the world, then maybe we can see the beauty in ourselves, and then maybe we can see the beauty in others.

Though Christianity is not a religion noted for being in tune with nature, we have our own seasons, seasons that are tied to the turning of the earth and the moon. The gospels don't tell us the date or even the season of Jesus' birth. Tradition places the Feast of the Nativity of Jesus of Nazareth on December 25, most likely so that Christianity could compete with important pagan festivals of the winter solstice.

There is also a Feast of the Nativity John the Baptist, which tradition places on June 24. It's not a big deal here in the United States, but it's a big deal in France and by extension in Quebec. I remembered that last week I did some research about it. I learned that the date was likely chosen to compete with important pagan festivals of the summer solstice. In France and Quebec John's feast is celebrated with huge bonfires to honor the sun. They're made by setting fire to elaborate wood structures similar to those burned on Christmas Eve on the levees in French Louisiana, where they're said to guide the way for Papa Noel.

I rather enjoy imagining that Jesus anchors the winter solstice and John anchors the summer solstice. I don't think it makes me a pagan. Rather, to me, it feels rather like a harmonized call to the wilderness.

I want to tell you another story about that long-ago trip to Black Canyon of the Gunnison. Black Canyon of the Gunnison is not as vast as the Grand Canyon but still striking in its own way. I don't think it's particularly well-known, so let me tell you a little more about it. If you go to the official National Park website, you'll see this headline on the main page: "Deep, Steep and Narrow." Then it says this:

Big enough to be overwhelming, still intimate enough to feel the pulse of time, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park exposes you to some of the steepest cliffs, oldest rock, and craggiest spires in North America. With two million years to work, the Gunnison River, along with the forces of weathering, has sculpted this vertical wilderness of rock, water, and sky.²

I should add that the canyon at its deepest point is 2700 feet deep. At one viewpoint, it's 1800 feet deep but only 1100 feet wide.³

On that long-ago trip, we were running quite late and arrived in the park well after sunset. The road we were on is just a regular state highway that crosses the park boundary and goes on to the campground where we would spend the night. On the way it becomes winding and thus very slow. The car headlights revealed just the patch of road ahead. It was very dark. I remember looking out the side window in the direction where the canyon was supposed to be. I couldn't make out any details. But it looked *intensely* dark, like a lake of black velvet. It was just *so* dark out there.

I thought it was just dark. But it also felt kind of disturbing, because it didn't look like any dark I'd ever seen before. I found out why it was disturbing the next morning when, in the clear light of day, we drove back down that road. That black velvet lake was the void of the canyon itself. The canyon rim was not far beyond the road, and there were no guardrails. We were able to park in different places and approach the rim. That's where I saw those bent and beautiful juniper trees standing sentinel over it all.

Maybe Advent is a little like driving by that dark void at night. It's a wilderness, but we're not alone. In every wilderness, we are changed. From every wilderness, we return. Remember that prayer from the beginning of this sermon: "Lord, make me a channel of your disturbance." What we see in that wilderness John we pray for ourselves. Lord, make us channels of your disturbance. Lord, help us to make a straight path for our bent Jesus to be revealed.

Notes

¹ There are slightly different versions of this available online; all are noted as "author unknown." The one I used was originally posted by the Rev. Laurie Brock on Facebook on March 13, 2021.

² From the Home page of the National Park Service Black Canyon of the Gunnison website, available at <https://www.nps.gov/blca/index.htm> (accessed December 4, 2022).

³ From the "Canyon Dimensions" page of the National Park Service Black Canyon of the Gunnison website, available at <https://www.nps.gov/blca/learn/nature/dimension.htm> (accessed December 4, 2022).