

**A LONE VOICE OF HOPE**  
**ISAIAH 11:1-10; MATTHEW 3:1-12**  
**DECEMBER 9, 2007, ADVENT TWO**  
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Every so often a John the Baptist figure pops up. He appears when things get stale and the life of a society is hollowed out by greediness like an old tree consumed by termites.

The line between the good of the community and self-indulgence is lost. Vienna at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was described as a time of “nervous splendor.” America, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>, a society of “irrational exuberance.”

At such moments “prophets without honor” appear on the scene. Kierkegaard in Denmark; Kafka in Vienna; M.L. King in America. Figures like the Baptist who called people to turn away from religion as ritual and self-justification and embrace the spirituality of transformation.

William Carlos Williams was a John the Baptist figure in the arts at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “Rigor of beauty is the quest,” he said. But “beauty is feared more than death.”<sup>[i]</sup>

Williams was contending with the dead letter of 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry that subjected everything, like literary Pharisees, to meter and rhyme—the law of verse then in fashion. So Williams turned poetry inside out and made its form subject to the vision of the poet.

In one scene he depicts the public library in Paterson, NJ – his representation of classical culture to which the tired metaphors of metered poetry were wed – engulfed in flames. Rather said Williams let the poet’s subject matter be everyday life. When Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (who Williams said had ‘minds, like beds, always made up’) criticized him Williams pictured them both in his poem *Paterson* as blocks of ice floating down the Passaic River.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Sound familiar? The Sadducees and Pharisees to whom John preaches in today’s reading from Matthew were living in the empty form—the hollowed out tree—of religious ritual.

Their religion and their lives were a vapid going through the motions of keeping the law, while their actions contradicted the principles and justice of Torah.

Why do we choose to keep the forms of religion even as our lives veer from the wisdom and spirit of the traditions we honor in worship? Partly, I would say because a prayer or liturgy can be said and checked off the list with the satisfaction of having done one’s duty. Partly, also because living justly requires the hard work of a life-long commitment to taking a daily personal inventory then making needed changes of behavior.

I’d like to explore today the powerful message of John the Baptist as we enter this second week of Advent and a new church year.

I’d also like to remind us of Advent’s historic larger focus—beyond the journey to the manger—of preparation for the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

The end of history and final judgment is the context for John's appearance in the first century and for his relevance to us today.

"Rigor of beauty is the quest," says Williams. And by beauty I take it he means the affirmation of life in all of its raw honesty and possibility and terrifying consequence; and rigor in this sense—pursuing life like that is not for spiritual light-weights.

Thus, said Williams, "beauty is feared more than death." We would rather write dead poems about fossilized Greek gods and marble statues than walk into a shack on the other side of the tracks, as Dr. Williams the physician often did, to tend a pregnant teenager; or intervene between an alcoholic and his wife; or hold the hand of a terminal patient with emphysema. Then describe, as Williams the poet was compelled to do, on his prescription pads with simple clarity the beauty of such moments lost to the eye of fundamentalism or holier than thou piety.

We fear the quest for such beauty because it requires self-examination. The pregnant teenager, the alcoholic, the terminal patient evoke fear or repugnance or compassion in me. Feelings I cannot ignore and remain un-haunted. So rather than pursuing beauty, life in all of its fullness, I make peace with death, with metered poems, with life restricted to narrow boundaries or laws. Life shrunken and downsized, gated and policed.

The inclination to downsize truth and sacrifice beauty is not limited to a particular century but is a human tendency in any period.

I would wager there is, in some Christian theme park, even as we speak, a life-sized John the Baptist figure you can stand beside and have your picture taken with. Or rest your chin on the top of some Baptist cut-out and become yourself for a brief photo of the man in camel's hair—like the cover of your bulletin today.

But, I am afraid the real Baptist would engulf us in one bite and spew us out as bland believers.

Several of you have shared interesting articles about religion in America. One entitled "Soft Sell Jesus" from the magazine *Style* says it all. Making Jesus palatable, attractive.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Another couple of articles deal with the recent congregational survey of the 20,000 member Willow Creek Church in Chicago. One is titled, "A business model for saving souls."<sup>[iv]</sup> Another says the leaders of the church have confessed that their consumer style religion does not meet the needs of their members.<sup>[v]</sup>

While responding to felt needs like Starbucks in the narthex and co-ed softball leagues attracts, the pastor says, biblical study, small groups and spiritual practices retain. We're revamping our program top to bottom.

Mainliners should find nothing to celebrate in this critique. As I said last week we have our own issues. Yet, another article someone shared says that thriving, dynamic churches place people above tradition—the mainline is too encumbered with tradition.

One former mainline member, now a non-denominational church-goer says, "The result is a lifeless church. God is reduced to a God of chance rather than a God of guarantee. The question is "do you want what God is doing today and tomorrow?"

“How many souls are being saved in denominational churches,” he asks. “How many sick healed? How many healed from emotional wounds and social dysfunctions? Healing, salvation and deliverance are things Jesus Christ died for so we could experience abundant life with Him.”<sup>[vi]</sup>

That almost sounds like some John the Baptist. One is coming who is mightier than I who will baptize you with the fire of transformation and new life.

As for the others—the onlookers, the undercover agents from the Sanhedrin, the elders and deacons from First Church, that pastor from Westminster, the board of Trustees from the Church of the Tasteful Redeemer—

as for those who presume to say for themselves we were here when this city was a frontier village, or our stained glass windows are renowned through the land—I tell you that God can find for himself believers from illegal aliens and churches that worship in rented fire-halls.

It is noteworthy John the Baptist appears at the beginning of all four Gospels while the birth narrative of Jesus is included in only two. There is little doubt about the importance of his role as Jesus’ forerunner and herald.

In Matthew, John is introduced particularly unexpectedly. No sooner does the baby Jesus escape the clutches of Herod than we hear the cry, “Repent for the kingdom of Heaven is upon you!”

But not only are we startled at the words, the crowds gathering to see and hear John astound. Mega-church sized crowds. It is an awe-inspiring moment in Matthew’s Gospel. If his spiritual pedigree for Jesus going all the way back to King David did not get the attention of his Jewish Christian readers he has it now. And this is precisely what God does. He gets our attention. God works like van Gogh at the peak of his powers—sudden, unexpected, intrusive brush strokes upon our lives.

God’s activity is not some slow growing ivy climbing the lattice work of history but an angry Elijah dueling fifty false prophets in a mountain stand off; a Berlin Wall collapsing overnight; or a Martin Luther King, Jr. turning his back on a comfortable ministry among Atlanta’s black middle class, striding across the American cultural landscape.

I said earlier that we maintain the form of religion because it gives us a check-list sense of security but that truly observing the faith we profess takes something much more profound—the willingness to examine ourselves and make the kind of changes in our daily living that reveal dependence upon God’s will and vision.

When Kierkegaard challenged the institutionalization of Christianity that governed Danish civic life; and Kafka confronted the Austrian judicial system; and Martin Luther King, Jr. took on not just racism but classism in America they entered uncharted and dangerous waters. But their compass was their hearts fixed on the rigorous pursuit of beauty, of life, of justice.

The reading from Isaiah today is memorable for its reference to the archetypal enemies of the animal kingdom lying down, dwelling together: the wolf and lamb, the leopard and kid, the calf and lion and a little child leading them.

Reminds me of the poet who said, “I lived like a monster but I want to die like a child.”<sup>[vii]</sup> I think that’s what Isaiah means too.

Remember these were nearly the first words out of the prophet’s mouth as the people were being hauled off into exile. There will come a day, God says, when I will do this. I will do it for you.

No magic wand but a shoot growing out of an old stump. A green, living shoot from the old tree of life we all thought was decayed and dead.

The old stump of the struggling mainline church; the old stump of a broken marriage; the old stump of addiction and fear.

The old stump of our trembling hearts even now as we ask ourselves how can we trust this God, this Christ whom we have left standing at the front door of our lives? We barely know him. Are we to give everything into his care?

Rigor of beauty is the quest. Amen.

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<sup>[i]</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions Press, 1946) 3.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Williams, 113ff.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Scott Bass “The Soft Sell,” *Style Weekly*, November 7, 2007. Cover story.

<sup>[iv]</sup> Manya A. Brachear, “A business model for saving souls,” *The Chicago Tribune*, Section 1, November 24, 2007. 1.

<sup>[v]</sup> Bob Burney, “First-Person, A shocking confession from Willow Creek Community Church leaders,” *Baptist Press*, November 6, 2007.

<sup>[vi]</sup> Keith Simmons, “A thriving, dynamic church places people above tradition,” *USA Today*, On Religion.

<sup>[vii]</sup> Franz Wright, “Heaven,” from *God’s Silence*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 43.