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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z47
2 Advent (Year A) 8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 8 December 2019

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

Decolonize Your Mind!

"May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing..." (Romans 15).

What is the good news of John the Baptist?

1. In every conversation lies an implicit promise that we will be informed, entertained, expanded, perhaps even appreciated, loved or saved. But this is not always how things work out. This week I found myself at the most elegant Christmas party of my life. Original paintings by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), James Tissot (1836-1902), Claude Monet (1840-1926), Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), René Magritte (1898-1967), David Hockney (1937-) and others surrounded the guests in every room. Near the end, feeling exhausted, I took refuge alone on a sofa in the front room when a gracious older man approached and asked if he could sit with me.

He seemed so familiar! We talked as if we had been loosely acquainted for years.¹ And then he told me this story about when he served as a community liaison for the police force and Jim Jones, the charismatic cult leader, invited him to Sunday worship.

Jim Jones told him the time to be there and the uniform he should wear. When my friend arrived Jones had two hulking bodyguards with him. He never took off his sun glasses and looked away at the wall as they talked. After the police officer gave his lecture to a thousand people in the congregation he sat enjoying the choir. Although the service wasn't over and he wanted to stay, the two bodyguards flatly told him it was time to leave. My friend didn't know what to do but really he had no alternative.

That week someone else who had been there told him what happened after he left. Jim Jones took the stage and told his followers, "Did you see that police officer, he came when I told him to come, wore what I told him to wear and left when I told him to go. Stay with me because I have power." Within a couple of years Jones murdered 918 people in Guyana. My new friend wonders how many of them were at church with him that day.

2. So what is the difference between John the Baptist and the cult leader Jim Jones (1931-1978)? At first the two might seem to have a similar image and message. Depictions of John the Baptist in this Cathedral and elsewhere often make him seem

angry and unstable. For centuries the most identifying features of John have been his uncombed hair and rough clothes. In the Willets stained glass window John seems to be shouting as a lightning bolt strikes from heaven.

John exclaims, "You brood of vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come." And we feel condemned. As the axe lies "at the root of the trees" we might even worry that we have the "unquenchable fire" as our destiny (Mt. 3).

This is the second week of the new Christian year. For the next twelve months on Sundays we will read through the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew cares about faithful Jewish people. He constantly tries to show us how Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. The word gospel means "good news" and the point of this art form, of these stories, is not to record ancient history. It is to provoke us to really see.

John the Baptist's camel hair clothing and leather belt, his life in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey – these identify him with the prophet Elijah and Isaiah's promise of a time when the "earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11).

Jim Jones ruled through fear, intimidation and violence – a more extreme version of what we experience in the news from leaders every day. In contrast, John the Baptist offers the opposite. He gives us an inclusive vision of hope for all people. We have the chance to experience lasting joy and he doesn't want us to squander this opportunity.

Every time a word is used its meaning becomes slightly altered. You can see this when we repeat something that has already been said. Words change meaning. They also wear out over time. "Awesome" used to be a serious word with religious content before it became a meaningless cliché. The most important word for Matthew in this passage and perhaps even the whole gospel is the Greek word metanoia. It means to change your mind or soul, to be transformed. The worn out Christian word for this is "repentance."

John the Baptist isn't scolding us, or imploring us to be good, like some finger-wagging Puritan. John wants to change our entire orientation to the world. We are in chains and John wants to set us free. He wants to free our minds.

Let me point out three signs of hope in his message. First, this is a radically open invitation. He addresses everyone. Each person has dignity and he baptizes Jew and non-Jew alike. With even the temple leaders everyone flocks to the wilderness to see

him. He says your race, nationality, religion is not the most important thing about you. Not being related to Abraham will not hold you back when it comes to God.

Second he says that everyone has a chance, because this is not about our identity: who our father was, or our income, status, political party, race, etc. What matters is the fruit that our lives bear. This is simple. Do our actions lead to indifference, violence, manipulation and destruction or to love, healing and wholeness?

Finally, comes the most difficult part to explain. Because identity matters so much to us we feel a stubborn compulsion to misinterpret John's most frightening metaphor about the wheat and chaff. This is not a metaphor about righteous or evil groups. John does not mean that some people are valuable and should be gathered into the warm barn while others deserve to burn. He is using a metaphor of purification. The fire is a refining fire that burns away impurities. The Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) writes that the line between good and evil does not run between various groups of people but through every human heart.²

We all have a kernel of goodness, wisdom, bravery and value that deserves to last forever. We also all have imperfections in our character that are fundamentally incompatible with life in God. We know what impurities need to be rooted out of our lives: the hounding negativity, unkindness, anxiety, self-centeredness, indifference, insecurity, greed and fear of those who are different. This chaff exists in every human soul. It includes the bitterness of homophobia, entrenched white supremacy, persistent misogyny.

3. So instead of that old language we hear from street preachers about repentance, listen this morning as John invites you to decolonize your mind. I have learned so much on this subject from the Kenyan author Ngūgī Wa Thiong'ō (1938-). Ngūgī grew up in a Kenyan household with a father, four wives and about twenty-eight children. They spoke Gĩkũyũ as they worked in the fields and around the home. Before attending school he inhabited a harmonious world held together as all are by stories.

Ngūgī writes that English was more than just a language it became *the* language. If children spoke their own language in the vicinity of school they were beaten, fined money that they didn't have or made to carry a metal plate around their necks that said, "I am stupid."³

Ngugi writes that the "real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life." This comes about through what he calls "the cultural bomb" whose effect is to "annihilate a people's belief

in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as a wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland.”⁴

Hawaiians had one of the highest rates of literacy in the world during the 1800's. But then after Americans criminally overthrew the government it became similarly illegal to teach the Hawaiian language in schools. For three generations local people say the “white is right” movement dominated official culture. If you are my age and native Hawaiian you are very likely to have been entirely cut off from your own language, cultural practices and a large part of your own self. Ngūgī says it is like being made to stand outside yourself to understand yourself. Being a Christian today is a little like this. You can't help but feel such hope for the new generation coming of age in Hawaiian immersion schools.

Here in North America if you are a gay man, you have to struggle so that our culture's demeaning and dehumanizing stereotypes do not remain part of your picture of yourself. This is true of white supremacy and misogyny too. These demonic pictures distort our inner landscapes. They divide us from each other and from God. They are the chaff in every person's heart that needs to be incinerated by the Holy Spirit so that we can be our truer selves.

In every conversation lies an implicit promise. At the party I gradually recognized that I was talking to Frank Jordan. He served as mayor of San Francisco in the 1990's when my wife and I first moved here. In that conversation his humility and graciousness showed me he didn't need to belittle others for the sake of his ego.

About one quarter of the New Testament is attributed to the Apostle Paul. You might say that his whole message can be boiled down to this statement. In the impenetrable ambiguity of human life when we seem like slaves of the messages that we hear, God offers us freedom from our compulsive preoccupation with human authority.⁵

It is time. It is time for the earth to be full of the knowledge of the Lord. It is time to decolonize our faith and free our minds. And that is the good news of John the Baptist. “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in believing...” (Romans 15).

¹ He told me about growing up south of Market Street, joining the San Francisco Police Department about the Season of the Witch years in the 1970's when mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk were murdered by their colleague Dan White.

² Matt Boulton, "Change Your Mind: SALT's Lectionary Commentary on Advent Week Two," *SALT*, 3 December 2019. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/12/3/change-your-mind-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-two>

³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann Kenya, 1988) 11.

⁴ Children growing up in this setting "exposed exclusively to a culture that was a product of a world external to [themselves]... being made to stand outside of [themselves] to look at [themselves]." *Ibid.*, 16, 3.

⁵ "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NRSV).