

"A JOHN THE BAPTIST EVENT"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 29, 1987

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### INTRODUCTION

I wonder...have you ever known a John the Baptist? John the Baptist is somebody who brings you up short...who punctures your pretensions and reminds you who you really are. Maybe it's someone who remembers you from way back...who reminds you of your humble origins and won't let you pretend to be somebody you're not. That's a John the Baptist.

Preachers run into John the Baptist from time to time. It's so easy for preachers to forget that they're mere human beings because people like to put them on pedestals, wanting them to be different and giving them a title and saying nice things about their dull sermons. And after a while you begin to believe all that stuff. Then along come a John the Baptist.

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### DEVELOPMENT

Well, that's a John the Baptist and he's part of this Advent landscape. He's the person who punctures your pretences. Have you ever met a John the Baptist? Chances are you have. We all have. Why some people pick up and move some place else because of John the Baptist. This may be part of the reason some people leave a small town and come up to the big city. It's hard to make something of yourself in a small town where people remember you growing up. They knew you then and they won't let you forget that.

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There's an old saying, "A prophet is without honor in his own country". They knew him there, that's why. Jesus used that saying about Himself in Nazareth when He preached His first sermon there. "Is not this Joseph's son?" they asked. "Who does He think He is?" A prophet is without honor in his own country because they knew him there. They may cheer us on, but there's apt to be that one or two who fails to take us seriously. "I knew him when". That's a John the Baptist and he won't let you pretend to be anything other than who you really are.

I'll tell you this: I'd rather be a John the Baptist than to meet up with one. There's little fun in being confronted by one. Especially the real one, the first one. His job was to prepare the way for the Messiah. His method

was to strip people of their pretensions, to make them honest, to get them to confess who they really are. His job was to get them to be humble - because, you see, God can't come to you in any other way.

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And that's how we are to understand the mission of John the Baptist, what his mission was about and what he was here for. He's Elijah - preparing the Way for the Messiah - shaking things up, stepping on toes here and there.

In one particular scene John is busy baptising people in the River Jordan, getting them ready for the coming of the Messiah - the new day. The crowds are all around him. John was popular, a "folk hereo" of his day. The Messiah was so desperately longed for and John was so genuinely honest as a man that he was accepted by thousands of people in his day as the forerunner of the Messiah - as Elijah. In fact, some even thought that John himself might be the Messiah, but he denied it and disclaimed the title. He said he was not the Messiah. Said he, "I am Elijah - the one who prepares the way for the Messiah".

Now in this scene at the Jordan River are some Sadducees and Pharisees, members of the two prominent religious parties of the day. Religious celebrities, you might say. A bit of a father in John's cap, as any evangelist knows, to have the celebrities come out and bless your meeting with their presence and a word or two. That means the crowds will follow. It's a bit of a compliment to John, but he's not impressed. He says to them, "You brood of vipers...". And he turns them away with words like that and he won't baptize them because they won't repent. They believe they don't have to. After all, they're respectable people...proud to be members of the covenant that God made long ago with Abraham. That's what they say.

So John shakes them up a bit. He aims directly at their pride. He says, "Do not presume to say to yourself, 'We have Abraham as our Father'". That is, don't hide in your genealogy - or your status, or your rank, or your address, or your prestige. Who cares about all that stuff? Who cares about your

ancestors? God can raise out of these very stones children of Abraham. You had nothing to do with it anyway. Your being chosen was an act of grace - a gift. And what's more, you inherited it. So who cares about your genealogy? What matters are your deeds! Your performance. So, bear fruit that befits repentance. That's the text and it says this. John the Baptist is a troubling preparation for Christmas - for all of us.

WHY IS HE THERE?

Why is He there? He's there to make us humble, so we will see God when He comes into our world. That's why he's there.

There's an old Rabbinic tale about a man asking why no one can see God anymore. He said in the "old days" people saw God, the Scriptures reveal that. People saw God. Why can't they see Him anymore. And the wise man answered, because today no one can stoop low enough. You see, He came in a manger, not in a mansion. He came quietly, unannounced - not with a loud fanfare. He came humbly, and what John the Baptist is saying to us is that you and I won't see Him unless we humble ourselves. "Don't presume to say to yourself, 'Ah, but we have Abraham as our father'". That won't work. That won't get you a reserved place at the stable, or a box seat next to the manger. In fact, it gets in the way. The proud won't see Him, John is saying. Pride gets in the way.

And John and all the rest of the Prophets in the Bible say, that's our problem. Pride. Pride is what separates us from God. But they define pride differently than we do. That's why it's so difficult to understand what the Bible is saying. We tend to define pride as a good thing, an asset. We see pride as having a good self-image, and that's good. Nothing wrong with that. But in the Bible pride is define differently.

Pride in the Bible is presumption, pretending to be something other than who you really are. And that's why Jesus was so hard on the man who thanked God that he wasn't like other people, because...he was like other people. He was hiding behind his piety, his religion, using his religion to be somebody. God can't get to you if you do that. That's why it is condemned. Pride in the Bible is using rank, and status, and title, and race, and religion, and grades, and success, and good looks, and fancy car and clothing - whatever - to pretend that you don't need anything outside of your self. Don't ever presume to say, "we have Abraham as our Father...we don't need to repent". We don't need to humble ourselves. Pride is hiding your self behind a facade. In the case of these Pharisees, it was a facade of religion, but in our came it may be something else. It gets in the way.

ADVENT / A TIME OF SOUL SEARCHING

My Finnish friends here in the Church once told me that the people of Finland have a family ritual of cleaning the entire house before Christmas. Everything must be sparkling before December 21st. You may or may not do this, but at least this is a good time for a bit of spiritual housekeeping.

Advent comes at a time when we have our shortest days with long nights of darkness, but we look forward to a gradual lengthening of the day with its accompanying light. Likewise, Advent speaks of the darkness of sin, of our failures and unresolved conflicts, which prompted God's sending Jesus into our world, but it also speaks of hope because God did come in the form of Jesus,

the Light of the world. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

Therefore, Advent is a time of soul-searching - yes, of repentance and contrition - but it is also a time of thanksgiving and joy - thanksgiving for what God has done for us and joyful anticipation of that great day on which we celebrate it.

Advent is a time of planning. Ask yourself questions like these: how can we share what God's love means to us? And how can we share our Christian Christmas with others? What kinds of decorations can we use that will show how we feel. And what kind of cards can we send that will tell the story of Christmas....and how eternal truth brushed up against us in that Christ event.

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And God's coming into the world was preceded by John the Baptist to show us that those events that shake us up and disturb us, that strip us of our dignity, that humble us, that tear off our masks, all of those events that we hate so much are John the Baptist events. And the good of them may be that they will prepare us for understanding who and what Jesus was and is.

C. S. Lewis - who many of us have enjoyed reading - once put it this way:

"Christian religion is - in the long run - a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in dismay. And it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through the dismay".

And that's the clue or the key for understanding this scene from the Gospel of Matthew. The Pharisees and the Sadducees came to John wanting to enter the Kingdom, into that unspeakable comfort...by just flashing their credentials. John says, it's not that easy. Don't ever presume that you can simply "sashay" your way into the Kingdom by flashing your credentials around. You won't get there that way. You get there by humility. The only way that God can come to you is for you to be who you really are. And as you come to accept yourself as you really are, remember that God loves you - just the way you are.

So when something happens to you, something that knocks you off your pins and humbles you, embarrasses you and leads you even to dismay - whatever - then look up. Get ready. It may be a John the Baptist event, sent by God to prepare the way for the coming of His life and His glory. Amen.

PRAYER

Let us be still and remember Jesus...as He was then - powerful to heal and to speak and to save. Think of Him as He is now, powerful as the Spirit of God among us...to lift us up out of the low place and to set our feet once again on the High Road of life. O God, in these days of Advent into which we now enter, draw us...draw us to Him who is the incarnation of Thyself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of His great love...for all mankind. Amen.

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PRAYER

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FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation...a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to \_\_\_\_\_ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

PASTORAL PRAYER: November 29, 1987

LORD - That we are alive,  
That the ground is firm beneath our feet,  
That rest can compensate for toil,  
That food is plentiful and delicious to our taste,  
That earth might be fair, and all her sons be blest.

THY NAME BE PRAISED!

LORD, we would thank You for dear friends who really care...  
for ways that open when doors seem shut,  
for the reality of forgiveness - human and divine.  
for the blessed assurance that "more things are  
wrought by prayer than this world ever dreams."

WE THANK YOU FOR YOURSELF -

The ground and the source of every good, and  
especially for YOUR LOVE...revealed to us in  
the Child of Bethlehem...that LOVE that no re-  
sistance and diminish, no need ever exhaust.

WE PRAY THIS DAY -

For those who are finding life to be hard. Make us deeply  
sensitive to those who feel pain, who know stress and  
anguish, knowing that it is a matter of grace and not  
merit that we ourselves are not there.

WE PRAY, TOO, for ourselves...ashamed that we have done so little with  
so much, yet always struggling to offer YOU our more  
obedient service.

GIVE us keener self-understanding - as keen as we can bear at  
one sitting, lest we think of ourselves more highly, or  
more lowly than we ought to think.

GIVE each of us a sense of what is truly important in life,  
lest we squander our time and waste our energies and  
our money on the glitter and tinsel of life.

GIVE us a due regard for our unity with all your people,  
lest we think in small patterns and exclusive ways  
and forget that YOU are the Lord of all the earth,  
Lord of all the people.

WE WOULD ASK for ourselves the most meaningful ADVENT SEASON we have ever  
experienced.

- over \*

PRAYER (continued)

GRANT, O GOD, that when Christmas morning breaks for us this year...

THAT,

We may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet, grumpy spiritis, empty pocketbooks and regrets for cards not sent and too many parties attended.

In these coming days, help each of us to be more determined to really "put Christ back into Christmas"...to make Him the center-piece of our celebrations...to let His love truly touch our lives.

In His tender name and loving spirit, we now pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, November 29, 1987

I. GREETING TO THE VISITORS

- A. A very warm welcome to all of you on this the First Sunday of Advent.
- B. Join us down stairs...time permitting...for coffee and for fellowship. If you're a visitor, be free in the sharing of your name with us. Sign...come and worship with us on other Sundays. Work with us....
- C. The roots of this Church are deep in the soil...a church that celebrates its 150th year this year, of which I have been pastor over 1/5th of that time. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit....
- D. On a Holiday weekend such as this, we have the joy of welcoming parents of some of our members. How grand it is to have Dianne Keller's mother, Pearl Keller, with us again... and also to greet Cary Danford's mother, Virginia, and her brother, Dan.

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. The announcements are in the bulletin for you...invite you to review them on your own....
- B. Work has begun on our December news sheet. If you have any news to share, be sure to get it to Lucy Dinnes, Editor, today.
- C. Today is the last Sunday to select Christmas cards from our selection here at the Church. Also, pick up the cards you have ordered...during the coffee hour this morning.
- D. A word regarding the Financial Canvass which is drawing to a close. To date, we have gratefully received 155 pledges, totalling \$ 89,134. There's still some work to be done before we reach our goal of \$111,000 and 230 pledges. Follow-up calls and notes will begin this week. If you haven't sent in your card...responded...may we encourage you to do so today.

III. "CONVERSATIONS IN MEMBERSHIP"

- A. New members will be received into the Church next Sunday, the 6th of December. Persons interested in strengthening a tie with the Church are invited to meet together tomorrow evening, Monday evening...6:30 pm in Fellowship Hall.
  - B. To new friends of recent months, we like to share the words of Wesley:
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"If your heart is as my heart is...then come, give me your hand".

Hearts and hands are needed to help keep this Church strong in its ministry at this busy corner of God's Kingdom.

Tomorrow evening. 6:30. Third Floor. We have about 15 people who are moving in this direction...hopefully there may be others...

IV. OFFERING

- A. Note the Christmas Flower Fund envelope in the pews...
- B. "More bless to give than to receive". In this spirit...