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Matthew 3:1-12
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Frosty and “Crazy” John

I was trying to decide what to do as a sermon series for Advent.

I have done one every year for the last fourteen and it is getting increasingly hard to come up with something new.

And so when I came across a suggestion to mix secular Christmas carols with Advent themes, I was intrigued. I decided to give it a try.

For this First Sunday in Advent I am tasked to integrate Frosty the Snowman with John the Baptist. Interesting combination!

As I thought about putting those two together this week, as I was trying to craft my sermon, I kind of regretted choosing to follow this path.

I mean, what the heck can Frosty have to do with Crazy John? I'm still not sure. But let me try.

Personally, I've always wondered why we have to stick the brash, brazen John the Baptizer in the midst of the Advent season!

Did you know that John the Baptist is part of each and every Advent on the lectionary calendar?

Of course, I know he is an important part of the story. But he is so ... so ... disturbing!

I suppose that's exactly why he's here.

Can you imagine John bursting into the church fellowship hall in the midst of our community Christmas dinner?

Oh, you think that's what Paul Elliot was doing?

Just kidding, Paul!

Or, can you imagine "Crazy" John making an appearance in your family dining room as you've gathered for your celebration?

The first thing, I imagine, we would notice is the SMELL! Geez, Paul, I mean John ... take a bath, for goodness sake!

And that outfit! Camel hair and leather? You couldn't at least wear a pair of pants?

Point is, I don't think John fits all that well into the homogenized, "It's a Wonderful Life" version of Christmas that most of us have in our minds.

John the Baptist is kind of a wet blanket, isn't he?

In the middle of our multi-colored lights, big puffy Frosty, reindeer with blinking noses, and flickering flameless candles, John the Baptist stands up and shouts for us to *repent* for the kingdom of heaven is near.

Nobody wants to hear that kind of a message, especially as we try to celebrate the season and enjoy another cup of hot spiced cider, egg nog – or maybe something stronger! ☺

That's why you won't see a lot of John the Baptist at Christmastime.

You won't find a plush John the Baptist doll in your boxes of decorations.

You won't find him ranting and raving like a madman in the middle of a children's Christmas storybook.

And you certainly won't see him standing in the back of the nativity scene with his wild eyes and camel's hair coat.

His is a crazy story about a seemingly crazy man. And yet in 1st century Palestine they came to hear him.

First only a few, then by the hundreds and then by the thousands.

All these people came to hear him preach. Walking sometimes five, ten, twenty miles from their cities, out into the wilderness, to listen to this desert prophet.

I mean, that is a long way to walk for a sermon. How far, I wonder, would you walk to hear me preach?

I imagine only as far as from your car to the door of the sanctuary. Don't tell me. I don't want to know!

But, these people came out into the desert to hear him preach. Not because his sermons were feel good, touchy feely, warm hearted.

Not because of a melodious back-up choir or the chance to sing old favorite hymns.

Not because they had some desire to see old friends that they hadn't seen all week.

Not because of some childhood habit of being in the synagogue on Friday nights, a habit that they couldn't kick. No.

They left their cities and towns and villages and walked five, ten, even twenty miles (or more) out into the desert, because they wanted to see a rare phenomenon.

They wanted to see a man who had been totally immersed in God.

They didn't want to be tantalized. They didn't come to be entertained. They didn't come to hear some fashionable religious wisdom.

They came because they wanted to hear an authentic Word for their lives.

And the key word they heard in John's preaching was repent.

In Greek, the word is metanoia. It means literally to "turn, to change, to reverse oneself."

In the Greek language, it is not a particularly religious word. It is rather an ordinary, everyday usable word for turning around and going the other way.

But bible scholar, Alan Richardson says, "In its New Testament usage it implies much more than a mere 'change of mind,' it involves a whole reorientation of the personality."

And so, we meet John standing knee-deep in the waters of the Jordan River, wearing camel's hair and munching on locusts and wild honey.

He calls out a stern warning to "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near." Those aren't exactly warm and friendly words of welcome.

When some Pharisees and Sadducees show up to be baptized, John lashes out at them, calling them a “brood of vipers” and warning them of the wrath to come.

He proclaims that someone more powerful is coming, someone who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Let me tell you, John doesn’t pull any punches, he preaches a rather abrasive message.

But, it’s also a very important message for us to hear during this season of Advent.

After all, all four gospels tell us that the story of Jesus really begins with John the Baptist.

All four gospels tell us that the path to Jesus goes through that wilderness, where John is preaching.

And, in all four gospels, John’s message is pretty much the same: *Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.*

It’s a message that can sound pretty terrifying to us, especially in contrast to our usual holiday fare, but it’s absolutely essential.

And since it is so hard to hear at first pass, we keep John the Baptist at a distance during this time of the year.

We hide him beneath the Christmas lights, and the holiday music, and the shopping carts.

And then we turn our attention instead to everything that seems “wonderful” and “magical”, those things that carry a sense of nostalgia and cheerfulness.

Like Frosty!

I mean, if you were to spend a moment daydreaming about your idea for a perfect Christmas, what images would you conjure?

For me, the church would be filled to bursting with the faithful. There'd be gorgeous music, candlelight.

Certainly, a deserved and blessed rest with family and friends after the Christmas Eve services.

The family would be gathered unattended by quarrels (regardless of their political persuasion) and permeated instead by a sense of Christmas good cheer.

But if we preach John the Baptist, that doesn't exactly fit the bill, does it? Not during Advent.

Truth be told, repentance is rarely an easy sell, as it's so regularly associated with feelings of guilt, of not doing enough or not measuring up.

So John's blunt message -- with nary a mention of forgiveness or grace -- is even, on the best of occasions, difficult to hear.

And all of this is compounded during Advent.

While Advent was originally devised as a season during which to prepare for the arrival of the Christ child in earnest repentance and humility, those days are mostly over.

Is there something you need to turn away from, which in turn, will help you turn towards Christ?

Today, Advent is a time of preparing a Christmas celebration that is about Christ's birth, of course, but also is dominated by feasts, presents, family gatherings, and all the rest.

That's why we like Frosty's story better.

Frosty The Snowman. His story is told in the Christmas Carol the choir sung earlier, but it's also told in a cartoon that first ran in 1969 and was on TV Friday night.

It's the day before Christmas and the first snowfall of the season has fallen.

After watching a terrible magician attempt to entertain them in school, a group of children build a snowman. They name him Frosty.

When the magician's hat is found by the children they place it on his head and amazingly, Frosty comes to life.

The magician, Professor Hinkle, though, wants his hat back.

And when it's removed from Frosty's head, he ceases to live.

The rabbit, Hocus Pocus, returns the hat to the children and Frosty comes to life again.

As he comes to life, he celebrates the simplest things. He celebrates life and he knows it is too precious to be wasted.

Thus begins Frosty's great adventure.

Frosty realizes the temporary nature of life itself. He understands that as the temperature rises, he is in danger of melting.

His young friend Karen wants to help him travel to the North Pole where he can live unafraid. So, Frosty sets off to save himself.

Alas, he is pursued by professor Hinkle, who still wants the hat back.

All seems well until Frosty realizes that Karen is unprepared for the cold.

Sensing it is critical she warm back up, he carries her into a greenhouse filled with Christmas poinsettia's.

Seeing his chance, Professor Hinkle locks Frosty in the greenhouse where he melts away, with no regrets, having saved Karen.

She is heartbroken and when Santa Claus arrives on the scene, he tells her not to worry, that Frosty was made with something more than normal snow.

He was made with Christmas snow. And so he will live again.

And in the end, as the Christmas wind blows across his melted remains, he indeed lives again.

This Advent we have John. He's loud and to the point and impossible to ignore.

But that's the Baptist's job. He's the forerunner. He's the one who comes to prepare the way for the coming of Christ.

He's a herald of the Christmas season that is to come.

And then we have Frosty, whose life, at least in the cartoon, also points us towards Jesus, but in a much subtler manner.

A Jesus, who like Frosty, lives with us, dies for us, and then lives again.

And, of course, in a more obvious way, we all know that when we see Frosty on TV or in windows or as a blow-up figure on our front lawns, we know that Christmas can't be far behind.

Both the Baptist and the Snowman, in their own particular ways, announce that Christmas is at hand.

Lest anyone should get the wrong idea, I should mention that there are, obviously, differences between Frosty the Snowman and John the Baptist.

(And I never thought I'd cite them in the same sentence).

While the Baptist wears a camel hair shirt, the Snowman wears a top hat.

The Baptist eats locusts and wild honey, the Snowman smokes a corn cob pipe.

The Baptist's legacy as the forerunner of the Messiah is enduring, the Snowman melts.

Still, for many in our society, Frosty may as well be synonymous with John.

There's not much difference between the two, since they are both figures who signify the coming of Christmas.

And although you won't see an 8-foot tall blowup John the Baptist on any lawns, we also don't run into Frosty the Snowman in August.

Maybe the ultimate difference is this: Frosty heralds the coming of Christmas but John signifies the coming of the Christ child.

And unfortunately, there has become a difference between the two.

Not really, of course, but in practice, there's a divide between the many who await the arrival of Christmas and the few who await the coming of Christ.

Most of us fall somewhere in between.

This season of Advent is about waiting, not for gifts under the tree, but for the life-giving gift of Jesus Christ, born of a woman to be the salvation of the world.

That's what the appearance of John the Baptist and Frosty the Snowman really announce.

But it's also about making ourselves the best of what God created us to be. And to do that we need to take a good look at ourselves and turn from that which gets in the way of a true relationship with Christ.

And this morning, as we begin our journey to Christmas morn, we can be assured that we go in good hands.

We go with knowing the rest of the story. A story that is bathed in love and compassion and peace.

May we live out those promises in all that we do.

Amen!