

Sermon for 4 December 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday in Advent

Scriptures: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalter: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 (*Insert: Alternate Leader/People*);

Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12)

### ***“Righteousness”***

In this second Sunday of using the Gospel of Matthew, which we will now continue for most of this new Christian year, we come to John the Baptist. Stark, harsh, but evidently the kind of “fire and brimstone” preacher that draws a crowd both in the Old Testament and the New ... and throughout the history of Christianity in America ... including currently, in what’s called “Christian nationalism” in U.S. political analysis ... we can’t avoid him.

Righteousness. What’s it mean? Both the Hebrew scriptures and all the Christian writings we use consider it essential. Because the Gospel of Matthew, we believe, grew out of Jewish thinking and aimed at Jewish converts to Christianity even more obviously than Luke, or John, or even Mark, Hebrew insistence on commandment-keeping and temple offerings colors everything in Matthew. “You brood of vipers!” Matthew’s John the Baptist storms at the law-abiding and probably most-like-Jesus thinking citizens of Roman-occupied Jerusalem and Nazareth and all those communities where Jesus was born and raised and launched his own brief career. They came out to hear him in crowds, and soldiers and synagogue leaders and all sorts of solid and ordinary citizens listened and oftentimes, many presented themselves to him for baptism and fresh commitment and, I suppose, hope for improvement in their circumstances.

So this Sunday, let’s talk a little about what the word means to us. Here we are, drawn to Jesus, bound to one another through baptism, nourished and supported by the Holy Spirit that the life of prayer and the sharing of Communion provide us ... we have some strong feelings about right and wrong. We believe in obedience. We may say and sing that we live in the land of the free, but a set of principles defines our doings; we’re not just free and independent operators, are we?

So, if we’re taking four weeks to think and pray about the birth of Christ the way in the season of Advent; if we’re pulling back from the cares and crises of the world to focus on the love of neighbor and self that we say describes the love of God, what do right and wrong mean for us?

What stops us in our tracks and makes us say, “Not that.” On the other hand, what breaks our hearts with its tenderness and calls us to our knees with gratitude and the wish to be like that, to strive at imitating the way one stoops to kiss a beautiful baby ... or a lovely animal, for that matter ... or a gorgeous sunset, or anything that overwhelms us with trust and hope and the yearning resolve to do better and, as the scripture puts it, “Go thou, and do likewise?”

Harsh and stark as he is, John endures in our biography of Jesus. Some think John trained Jesus ... that John’s religious community shaped Jesus’s beginnings, along with his parents and his home village and its synagogue and customs ... until John stood aside in awe as Jesus

ventured forth on his own wilderness adventure and returned to launch a career beyond anything we can fathom, except to honor and imitate its outlines and the energies we find stirring in our own breasts as we pray, and gather, and practice the basics of the life he taught and shared so briefly with a handful of disciples and who can estimate how many who were healed and the far more who listened and learned from the atmosphere that grew and grew around him?

What do we insist on? What holds the good together? What do we have to give up if we matter? What makes, or has the chance of making, the world a better place?

We're big on groups and organization. Is it really just finances that gets a good cause going and sustains it? Can you do good without money? Is a judge more moral than a politician? Don't get me started on preachers...How about a nurse? We've been saying, "Heroes work here" ...and for sure, Covid has made us respect care-givers and even research scientists ...

In my hometown, where a lynch mob burned down the Victorian-style courthouse while the Confederate soldier statue remained untouched on the town square, a new courthouse arose in the years just before I was born. It was white marble, modern and square, and around its top walls there were quotations. My dad's medical office looked out on that square, and I remember one of the quotations: "Righteousness exalteth a nation."

I ask you, on this Communion Sunday during Advent, what do we mean, what do we want, what do we pray for, what might we even willingly die for?

Righteousness.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, under the leading of his forerunner and proclaimer, John, let us ponder and pray.

Amen.