

## **“Pathway to Peace: Heart Awareness”**

**Matthew 3:1-12**

**December 8, 2019—Second Week in Advent**

*When we think of John the Baptist, we think of fiery language, odd practices, hair uncombed, eyes wild—we DON'T think of 'Peace.' But what if his message that we should awaken ourselves and be prepared for Jesus is actually an invitation to peace, to a congruence of heart and mind in God? Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in Matthew 3, verses 1-12:*

While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

John and his message were authorized by Isaiah’s prophecy:

Thunder in the desert!  
Prepare for God’s arrival!  
Make the road smooth and straight!

John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.

When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your

snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin! And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.

“I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned.”

*Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

I was at the automated car wash this past week, on a day expected to be busy, because that's the day that all the services are upgraded for car wash members. I was picking up a church member that afternoon for an outing, and I wanted my car to look presentable. This particular car wash has a line on the left for the full banana—wash, hand dry, vacuumed interior, spiffed up wheels. It also has a line on the right, and this is called the “Express Wash.” If you are a car wash member, you can go through the right-hand kiosk, drive your own car through, and get a cursory dry off by hand. AND, you get to cut into the left line ahead of other cars if you are driving yourself through.

Honestly, this makes me slightly irritated even on days when there just are a few cars waiting patiently on the left. To me, there should be one line since there's only one lane into the wash area. It just makes sense! Whether you are getting out of your car so the attendant can drive your car in, or you are driving yourself through, you should get in one line and enter the wash area in the order in which you arrived AT the line.

But on days like last Tuesday, when there were already 14 cars in line on the left, all the way down the row and curved around to the gas pumps, it was particularly irksome to see Express Wash cars jaunt up to the right kiosk and breeze right in front of the left-hand waiters.

I am sitting there inching up the line and after 20 minutes, I finally arrive near the front of the line. A woman in a big white SUV then races up to the right-hand kiosk, gets the gate to lift, and next, jockeys her way in front of me and another car. Grrr. I am already annoyed. But then, but THEN, she jumps out of her car and hands her keys to the attendant so that she can get the full wash and custom dry treatment reserved for those in the long left-hand line. Well, now, I am hot.

I know I shouldn't get hot. I know I am a minister and I should get out and say to her in a really sweet voice, "Have a blessed day!" I know I should not get triggered by something so trivial, but it wasn't fair, it wasn't just. Besides, it offended the Law of Moses and I had just finished reading Matthew 3:1-12 about John the Baptist going off on the Pharisees and Sadducees who were butting into the line at the baptismal font, just because they could. "You brood of snakes!" he screams at them. I wanted to say the same to the woman who had committed the *greatest sin of all time*, don't you know, cutting in front of ME in the car wash lane. I didn't go quite that far, but I wanted to!

Before I could stop myself (and I should have taken a breath and shrugged it off), I jumped out of my car and said something snarky to her about jumping the line. It was just one of those days, you know? You DO know, I know. She got all flustered and claimed she didn't know any better, and blah de blah, but of course, I was not interested in listening to her excuse. I just wanted to let her know that we all waited our turns and so should she.

The attendant made a feeble excuse for her that "maybe it was her first time there," but I was not hearing that either. I was frustrated; I had created my own narrative of assumptions, and I was not going to be dissuaded from them.

"Peace be with you," say the Advent angels. The soft lights and the ornamented trees, the snowflakes sprayed on prancing reindeer on the neighbor's lawn, the bright red bows and the Christmas music playing in the malls, all of this is calculated to bring holiday cheer and calm to our environs. Where do we have room for John's polemic in all that?

A dear friend of mine gave me a book a few days ago, and I can't put it down. I've nearly finished it already. It is written by Pema Chödrön, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun known for her writings on peace and mindfulness. In this book, *Welcoming the Unwelcome*, she talks about many pathways to peace.

I had brought the book into the car wash customer area with me, intending to get a start on it while I waited. I thumbed a few pages and arrived at the chapter entitled, "Does It Matter?"

In that chapter, Pema Chödrön provides this set up: Picture a couple who irritates you, who has irritated you from the first day you met

them. You only see them once in a blue moon, but whenever you are with them, you are sure enough irritated in their presence and you can't wait to break away. Maybe at night you spend a half hour lying in bed listing out all their shortcomings and thanking God you are NOT LIKE THEM. Then you go about your life and stop thinking about them.

Perhaps five years later, their names are mentioned to you, and you get irritated all over again. The pathway to irritation has been burned into your brain and is reinforced by your reaction. Whatever it is, it sows more seeds in your mind and those seeds bear the fruit of discontent in your future.

This is where heart awareness comes in. In Sanskrit, the word is "*bodhichitta*." *Bodhi* means "awake" and *chitta* means "heart" or "mind." The journey towards personal peace requires that we awaken our heart and/or awaken our mind to a new pathway, a pathway that is accessed as a broken heart in need of love. Rather than falling back to the familiar predilection of protecting our heart from pain at all costs, only when we experience heartache does our healing begin.

It is in that vulnerable heart place that we realize our own loneliness is no different from the loneliness everyone else on this planet experiences. It is in the place of suffering that we realize our own suffering can connect us to all those who also suffer. She writes:

When I'm embarrassed, when I feel like a loser, when I feel that something is fundamentally wrong with me, *bodhichitta* is present in those emotions. When I've made a big mistake, when I've failed to do what I set out to do, when I feel the sting of letting everyone down-at such times I have the option to tap into an awakened heart. If I really connect with my jealousy, my anger, or my prejudice, I find myself standing in the shoes of humanity. From this place, the longing to wake up to alleviate the suffering of the world comes naturally.

One way to find the peace of an awakened heart is a simple practice, one that I have been trying out on myself with amazing results! It is suggested that when we catch ourselves about to do or say something that doesn't feel quite right, or quite what Spirit would have us say or do as faithful people of God, we pause from our habitual reaction. Instead of blowing our stack like I did, saying something hurtful to ourselves or others, we ask a simple, internal question: *Does it matter? Does it really matter?*

For instance, when tempted to fire off that hateful text or email, does the perceived wrong really matter? Does it really matter to you and will it really matter to the recipient? If your spouse gets something wrong in the story they are telling others and you are tempted to jump in and correct them, *does it really matter?* Does it doom the story so that it no longer makes sense, or do you just need to be right?

If your child is proud to count to 100 in front of you, excited and overjoyed at this new learned skill, and they miss a number here and there, *does it really matter?* Or by celebrating with them, has your heart awakened to this incredible moment of connection that in just a few years you will yearn for?

Did it really matter that the woman in the white SUV cut the line last Tuesday? Did my reaction really matter to her or to me, other than to make us feel harshly toward each other? I can't say that it did, and I wish I had asked myself that question before I forged ahead on the righteous indignation of my assumption.

John attacks the Pharisees and Sadducees who have come to the water's edge to see what he was doing. Does it really matter that he is

irritated with them—does it matter to him, no, he is going to keep right on baptizing people in the water. Does it matter to them, no, they are going to do what the Law of Moses says they should do.

John is telling everyone to wake up, that God is about to do something really remarkable in their world. He doesn't know himself what is in store, but he knows whatever is coming will change the face of spiritual history. He has no time to waste!

In contrast, the people at the river's edge, be they common folk or professional religious authority figures cannot, of course, grasp what is being foretold to them. They know nothing of Jesus. Maybe some will actually meet Jesus, will be awakened by him, healed by him, or ministered to by him. Others may experience the other side of Jesus—the one without patience, the one who has his own prejudices, flareups, sulking sessions, the one who eventually comes to feel utterly, desperately, lonely and alone as he faces the end of his three-year ministry tour. But most of the people watching with amusement the spectacle of John the Baptist will not know Jesus, will not awaken, will not be changed. That is the nature of human suffering.

We can select a front-row seat in the theatre, if we choose. We can study intently Jesus and his Good News, or we can miss it. Maybe to us it really doesn't matter and besides, we are out at the concession stand getting popcorn—medium butter, please, and a Coke when the good part comes on, the part where Jesus assures us of God's unconditional love, the part where Jesus implores us to awaken our hearts and minds and change the world's well-worn, destructive pathways.

“What did I miss? What did I miss?”

“Oh, nothing much. It really doesn't matter.”

I'm sitting there at the car wash reading my book on peace and feeling none, when the woman in the white SUV comes up to me and says, "I'm really sorry about that. I just bought my membership last week and I thought the right-hand lane was the one I was supposed to use. I'd like to buy your wash today."

Well now, I felt like a total heel. Did it matter that she had delayed me another 45 seconds? No. Did it matter that she felt bad about it and I was angry about it? Yes, it did, because it didn't need to be that way. If I had already read that chapter, I might have taken a breath and chosen the pathway of peace. I didn't but I still had time, and her offer to buy my wash awakened the suffering in my own heart in such a way that I wanted to alleviate the suffering in hers. So, I said, "No, you cannot buy my car wash. Instead, I'd like to apologize for being rude to you and buy YOU a cup of coffee!" We had a laugh then and a moment of reciprocal compassion.

I've used this tool umpteen times this week since then, and it really works! My daily prayer is for *bodhichitta*—the awakened heart, to make itself known. My joy is in the peace that comes from not engaging in the well-worn pathways of conflict and judgment. We are with one heart and many voices, making our way through the lessons of Advent—so far, Hope and Peace.

*Namaste.* May the Spirit within me greet the Spirit that is within you.