

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER



December 4, 2022

STONES

yes, humans are replaceable

by Drew Downs

When John the Baptizer is scolding the religious leaders who come to him to be baptized, he makes a shocking claim. They can't rest on their family line because God can replace them with stones.

I don't think these are idle words or the hyperbole of an enraged prophet. They strike a very different and instructive chord. They are more the words of a man putting humanity in its place.

I'm reminded of God's instructions to the first human in Genesis: to care for creation. Not enslave it or oppress it.

Our work is 100% relational. As stewards, we protect all of creation, including its people. We don't exploit or destroy, overlook or consume. This is our job: to be in right relationship with God, each other, and creation. Or God will make someone else to do it for us.

ORDINARY TIME

Autumn 2022

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Advent

The word we probably hear the most in church this time of year is "prepare." Which seems natural, right? We're preparing our homes for the holiday, our church for its big day, and all that stuff that happens with Christmas.

But the preparing that the season calls us into isn't shopping and meal-planning. We are to prepare for the advent of Christ's return.

I really do love getting into "the Christmas spirit" this time of year. I am a big fan of anticipation. So getting fun things, making sweet treats, and wearing fun socks are all part of the season. But even trying to remember that "Jesus is the reason for the season" and "putting Christ into Christmas" don't actually turn our minds to the season that is *actually* at hand.

In Advent, we read about the coming of Christ into the world long ago as a reminder of God's in-breaking love for creation. And therefore, to put us in mind to watch for it *now*. And to long for his coming to transform the world *again*.

There are ways these ideas about the season of Advent match "the Christmas spirit" we are familiar with. But perhaps it is less as a reminder to be good and generous occasionally, and more an invitation to prepare for a way of living founded on that as normal. In other words, to prepare for our world to be as it is in heaven.

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

Autumn 2022

FOR SUNDAY

Second Sunday of Advent

December 4, 2022

Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

From Matthew 3:1-12

{John the Baptizer] "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

Reflection

In Advent, we are reintroduced to John, a man who baptized multitudes in the Jordan River while preaching repentance. In Luke's gospel, we meet him at his birth and discover that he is Jesus's cousin. In Matthew's gospel, he is a prophet who comes from out of the wilderness.

Then, when John notices that some of the people coming to him for baptism are Pharisees and Sadducees, he seems to lose it. He yells at them, calling them snakes and asks who warned them "to flee from the wrath to come?"

ORDINARY TIME

As trained as many Christians have become to hate these religious leaders, we may be at least *a little* disturbed by John's bit of harassment. If they've seen the light, why cast them back into darkness?

I suspect it isn't quite like that. There's no casting out. But there is indignation at the need to vindicate the people, the masses, from what they're used to from their own leaders.

This situation reminds me of Nicodemus, showing up at night to visit with Jesus in the third chapter of John. In one sense, we're happy to see them come to be changed by the grace of God. And in other sense, we're frustrated that they aren't doing this where the other leaders can see them.

Then John reminds them not to rest on race, lineage, or national identity as some kind of saving grace. Because, he argues, God can make stones into children of Abraham. In other words, blood isn't just *less* meaningful than we take it for. *It has no meaning to God at all.*

To be children of Abraham comes, not from place or people of origin. It comes from relationship to God.

These are messages that are *still* so disruptive to our thinking. Even as we expand our sense of community, we do so *wanting* lineage to matter. Our race to matter. Country or people of origin. We want these things to matter to God because we choose to make them matter to us.

This is ultimately what John rebukes. Not the people. Nothing about who they are. It is about allegiance and priority and value. What they think matters over our relationship with God and one another. That's what John's baptism is into. Putting love and relationship WAY above nationalism and identity. Because that is the foundation of the Good News Jesus brings.

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