
John the Baptist and Tall Buildings

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Third Sunday of Advent
Luke 3.7-18

"You brood of vipers!" John the Baptist yelled out at his people. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? , "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

This doesn't sound like a week before Christmas. This sounds like Friday the 13th and Halloween! Snakes and axes? One of our ushers just told me that this Sunday ought to be called "Viper Sunday."

Bit I think I know why John the Baptist said the things he did.

It does bother me a little bit. I mean, here we are, expecting Christmas and all that. We are looking for the baby Jesus. We are looking for all sorts of little babies and presents and such. We're only a week before Christmas.

And here comes John the Baptist, like he does every year around this time, yelling and carrying on about bad fruit, and threatening to take an axe to the trees.

Where did he come from? Who invited him to the Christmas party?

I think I know why John the Baptist said those things.

I was walking outside the Cathedral last week. I admired the magnificence of our campus. I am always in awe of this structure's beauty and life. And I love the symbolism of this great cathedral church. We stand for grace. We stand for love.

The Cathedral of St. Philip, with its tower, was once the tallest structure around here. We sat at the top of the hill on Peachtree Road, even when we were the little grey church on the hill. People looked up to us. We were where God should be, high and lifted up; we were high up in the air. People had to look up to the Cathedral.

But then, then, all these so-called high-rises began to be lifted up. Look at them!

They are still rising. Our good neighbors, right across the street, are not even finished yet. That building is not even at its height yet; apparently, it still has five or six stories to go.

I was worried last week that our new building across the street was going to block out our light. And I think I felt a little bit like John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was trying the best way he could to prepare for Jesus. And I speculate that John the Baptist got tired of all these structures purporting to go higher than God, to be taller than God's creation.

And he said, "There's going to be an axe set at the foot of these trees." These buildings, they all may look high, but unless they bear good fruit, they will be cut down. You people, you say you have Abraham as your ancestor, but unless you bear good fruit, you will die.

In John's mind, the world needed re-ordering. Before the messiah came, the great mountains would have to be leveled, the bad trees would have to be chopped down. Something has to change, thought John.

John the Baptist has a good point during the seasons of late Advent and Christmas. What do we actually do during this season? How many of us go out simply to gaze and to observe? We look at Christmas lights and marvel at decorations. We admire tall buildings and structures. We travel to exotic locations. We gaze fondly at little children. We gaze fondly at the baby Jesus.

John the Baptist is here to say, "So what?" Has any of this actually changed your life? Have you made straight any immoral ways? Have any of you repented? If not, do not expect that the Lord of Life will truly enter your life.

There is, indeed, a difference between gazing at little babies and inviting a new infant into your life. John the Baptist was tired of the casual gazers. Casual gazers are those who drive by the Cathedral but never enter. Casual gazers are those who drive by the Grand Canyon and stay in their car. Casual gazers love to smile at the little baby, but they do not want to carry the child.

So John the Baptist calls their hand. And he calls our hand today. What are we doing here? Do we concentrate on the little, helpless, baby, but not upon the baby when he grows up and asks us to change?

This message of John the Baptist is not comfortable. But suddenly in John's ministry, something happened. He noticed that the people coming out to him were not just the hypocritical Pharisees and Sadducees. It was easy for him to call *them* snakes.

John the Baptist began to see that some of the folks gathered around him really did want to change. They were not there just for the show. There were rich people there, folks who had plenty of food and who had two coats.

"What should we do?" they pleaded. John replied, "Whoever had two coats must share with anyone - anyone" who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

And then there were sure enough sinners, folks of bad reputation, coming out to him. The tax collectors were some of the most despised people in that culture. It was generally understood that tax collectors always skimmed much off the top. "Teacher," they pleaded, "What should we do?" Collect no more than the amount prescribed, said John.

And even soldiers asked the same thing. "What about us? What should we do?" Now the soldiers were definitely outside the acceptance of God's people. They represented Roman authoritarianism. But even they were touched; they were convicted.

"Do not extort money," said John. "Do not threaten folks with false accusation. Be content with your wages."

I believe that as John said these things, he, too was converted. He did not need to holler at his people and call them snakes. He realized that someone truly powerful was coming, more powerful than tall trees and magnificent buildings, and even more powerful than threatening evangelists.

And John grew humble. He said, "I am not even worthy to stoop and untie the thong of his sandals." Later he would say, "Jesus must increase; but I must decrease." When he finally did see Jesus, John learned an amazing humility; and that humility actually brought him peace.

I know what John the Baptist meant.

It is not about building tall buildings and magnificent structures. It is not about having a great job. It is not about having a

spotless pedigree or having so-and-so as your father.

It's not about buying the greatest Christmas present. It's not about receiving exactly what you think you want this Christmas.

It is about walking humbly with your God. It's about finding that peace that the apostle Paul spoke about to the Philippians; "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Maybe it's a little child, after all. The great and powerful God, the God of all creation and all love, comes to us a lowly and helpless child. That great God comes among us not with an ax at all, not with a winnowing fork in his hand at all. And that great God is not among the skyscrapers and the high-rises, not in the places of political power and prestige. That great God is not even at the top of Peachtree Road, or in the great bell tower of the Cathedral.

That great God of love and righteousness is the one who comes among us with the deep humility of a child. If we can look down this week, down to those in need around us, and down in our own hearts, we will find a marvelous humility. We will find true wonder and Christmas grace, and the peace of God that passes all understanding.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip