

“Are You Headed to the River?”

Matthew 3:1-12

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville

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I'd like to invite you, at the beginning of this sermon, to think for a moment about everything you're planning to do before Christmas.

The errands you have to run.

The gifts you need to purchase.

The people you plan to see, whether you're traveling or hosting...I suspect most everyone in this room has a list like this.

All the things you need to do to get ready for Christmas.

Now...on that list, I'm wondering if anyone here put, “Go to the river.”

Did that make your list?

Probably not.

“Go to the river” is probably not on anyone's list.

Just to clarify, I don't mean the Reedy River.

I mean the Jordan River.

You see, the Jordan River is where you'll find John the Baptist, and I'm wondering if anyone here is planning to pay a visit to John the Baptist before Christmas.

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While you're thinking about that, let me be the first to say that going to see John the Baptist is NOT on my list of things to do before Christmas.

Why?

I think you know why.

John just doesn't feel like he's in the Christmas spirit to me...

According to Matthew, this is what John has to say:

*“You brood of vipers! 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.”*

**You see, I don't want to go to the Jordan River this Advent, because John is preaching judgment.**

And I don't know about you, but I don't really like judgment.

Especially mixing judgment and church.

Do you recall this fall, when we were talking about Westminster's pillars and our vision?

Can you imagine if our vision was not Open Minds Open Hearts—  
but **We're a church that BRINGS GOD'S JUDGMENT...**

Judgment is not something I like to preach.

It's not something I like to receive.

Heck, I've been known, at different times in my life, to do what I can to avoid someone else's judgment...

I remember the semester in seminary when I was doing an internship as a hospital chaplain. It's the only time in my life when I've gone to work every day wearing a clerical collar.

The collar was helpful in a hospital setting. Even though I sometimes got confused for a priest, it identified me very quickly as part of the clergy, part of the pastoral care staff of the hospital.

But I never wore it outside the hospital.

I would put it on just as I was entering work, and I would take it off as soon as my work was done.

So one night, driving home after a long day, I wasn't paying close attention and I cut someone off in the road. It was my mistake, didn't even realize I had made the mistake until I saw the police lights in my rear view window.

Unfortunately, the car I had cut off belonged to a police officer.

After I pulled over, I did some quick calculations—and I whipped on my clerical collar.

The officer came over, asked if I knew what I did.

I said no, so sorry, I have no idea.

He told me I had cut him off, no signal, no nothing, and almost hit his car...

And with my clerical collar on, I apologized profusely and told him about the long day I had had in the hospital trying to provide care to all these different people in this crisis and that crisis...

He looked at me.

He looked at my collar.

And the officer said, "Father, this time I'll let you off with a WARNING..."

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I escaped that officer's judgment!

I wasn't in the mood for judgment back then.

And I'm not in the mood for John's judgment right now.

So...if the question is whether you and I want to go to the Jordan River this Advent, and hear the judgment of John, what's wrong with saying no?

Enjoy your month, John, but we'll be spending Christmas without you here at Westminster...

That's where I was tempted to go.

There's just one thing that kept me from going there.  
Or I should say, one person who kept me from going there.  
And that's Jesus.

Jesus was greatly influenced by John.  
He preached the same sermon John preached—repent, the kingdom of God has come near!

According to Luke, he was a cousin of John's.  
And according to every Gospel, he was baptized by John.  
What was it about John and his message of judgment that Jesus thought was so important for us to hear?

Let me get at it like this.

I remember the time when I with the basketball team back in college. This was a very small school, Division III, no scholarships, and I was the last person selected for the team, the bench-warmer on the team. They would only let me in a game when we were up by at least 20 points or down by 20 points with under a minute to go...

In other words, when there was ZERO CHANCE that I would affect the outcome of any game—that's when I got to see playing time.

All of which was perfectly fine by me.  
I was happy just to be along for the ride.

We had a good coach, and like any coach, there were times when he disciplined the team. When he judged the performance on the court. And he would always direct his criticism toward the better players, the ones who would actually make a difference in the game.

I recall one practice, I was loafing it.  
I mean, who cares?

I won't play...and I remember very vividly not trying very hard, when the coach threw down his clipboard and barked, "Ben, what did I just tell you to do? You need to do it!!"

I was stunned, shocked.  
My first thought was maybe he said my name by mistake.

The coach had gotten onto me??  
The coach had gotten onto me!

At that moment, I turned beet-red, my adrenaline went sky high...I was pretty embarrassed, and at the same time, I felt relieved.

Because the coach cared enough to provide constructive criticism to ANYONE on his team...he wanted EVERYONE to pay attention.

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I wonder if the judgment of God works something like that.  
That it's not about God wants to PUNISH us.  
But instead, God wants us to pay attention!

Do you think, IF you and I were to consider a trip to the Jordan River this month, do you think John just might try to get us to pay attention too?

It's so easy to get distracted at this time of year.  
To focus on the wrong things at this time of year.  
To feel like we're pulled in every direction.  
A million things to do.

And before we know it, another Christmas has gone by, and it begins to feel like the time that God has given you has slipped right by...

A few years ago, the columnist Frank Bruni wrote a piece about how his family vacations have changed in recent years.

He said that every year his family and extended family designate ONE WHOLE WEEK to get together. He admits, however, that he used to FUDGE a bit on the length of his stay at these gatherings.

He would arrive a day late.  
Leave a day or two early.

He would tell himself it was quality time he was after.  
That he was too busy to spend an ENTIRE WEEK with his whole extended family.

But then he goes on to describe how more recently, he's changed his tune. How he's made a point to be there from the beginning of the gathering to the end. And how he's found that the QUANTITY of time one spends with people can be much more important than aiming for so-called "quality time".

Bruni writes:

“With a more expansive stretch,  
 there’s a better chance that I’ll be around  
 at the precise, random moment  
 when one of my nephews drops his guard  
 and solicits my advice about something [very personal].

“Or when one of my nieces will need someone other than her  
 parents to tell her that she’s smart and beautiful.

“I know how my 80-year-old father feels about dying, religion and  
 God not because I scheduled a discrete encounter to discuss all of that  
 with him.

“I know because I happened to be in the passenger seat of his car  
 when such thoughts were on his mind and when, for whatever  
 unforeseeable reason, he felt comfortable articulating them.”

Bruni goes on:

“We delude ourselves when we...invoke and venerate ‘quality  
 time,’ [imagining] that we can plan instances of extraordinary candor,  
 plot episodes of exquisite tenderness,  
 engineer intimacy in an appointed hour.

“There’s simply no real substitute for physical presence.”<sup>1</sup>

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In other words, how are you spending your time this Advent?  
 Are you rushing from one thing to another this Advent?  
 Or are you paying attention to the people whom God sends across  
 your path?

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bruni, “The Myth of Quality Time,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2015.

Do you see where John's judgment takes us?

John may have preached judgment, but that judgment was just one color in the much broader and beautiful painting of God's love.

John was preaching repentance, and second-chances, and he was telling everyone: you've still got time!

Time to get rid of the grudge.

Time to let go of your anger.

Time to put down your pride.

Time to repair the relationship.

Time to become a different person, a new person.

Time to pay attention to whomever or whatever God wants you to pay attention to...

Because maybe, in an unplanned conversation, or a surprising moment of vulnerability, you won't just find yourself in a conversation with that person.

You just might find yourself in the presence of God.

In his recent book, *Elusive Grace*, the pastor Scott Black Johnston tells the story of what happened one summer when he and his family were staying at the family cabin in northern Minnesota.

It was time to get the septic tank taken care of, so he called the first name that he found.

He had a quick chat with a guy named Steve.

Steve promised to pump the tank the following Monday, when Scott and his family would be out.



Scott promised to leave a check for \$200 under the welcome mat.

The following Tuesday, Scott returned to the cabin, only to find the check still waiting under the mat. So he called Steve back, asked him what happened.

“I’m awfully sorry about that,” Steve said. “I’ve been dealing with a few things. You see, I just got diagnosed with cancer. It’s my third go-round, and I’ve been trying to set up appointments and all that.”

“Whoa,” Scott replied, “I’m sorry to hear that. Very sorry. Listen, you need to focus on getting better. I’ll call someone else.”

“No,” Steve said, “I can use the two hundred. How about I come next Monday?”

“That would be fine,” Scott replied. “I’ll see you then. Oh, and Steve, if it’s ok, I’ll put you in my prayers.”

The following Monday was a miserable day.

It was raining, it was chilly.

The mosquitos were out in abundance.

Then, at about 7am, the worst-looking septic-tank truck Scott had ever seen came rumbling down the driveway. It was belching smoke, losing paint, and spackled with all the stuff it had vacuumed out of other tanks.

Scott says that he walked outside, intending to hand Steve his check and beat a hasty retreat. As Steve stood up to greet him, Scott noticed a big green Jesus fish decal on the back of the truck’s tank.

“Do you know what that is?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Scott replied, “it is the ancient symbol for Christ.”

“I knew you would know,” Steve replied. “I knew because you said you would pray for me.”

“Well,” Scott mumbled, “I sort of had to do it. I’m a pastor.”

At this, Steve’s eyes lit up.

“Me too! I’m a pastor at the Independent Gospel Church in town.”

Scott smiled.

He said it was an absurdly awful moment.

The smoke, the rain, the mosquitos, the smell, the Jesus sticker.

Inside his head, a voice was pleading, ‘Hand the man his check and walk away!’

But he couldn’t walk away, because Steve was still talking.

“Scott, thanks for giving me an extra week. I’ve got to admit, I’m sort of worried about this whole cancer thing. The doctors say I’m tough. I’ve beaten it twice. But I have a daughter in college, bills to pay, and I’m wondering...could we pray?”

With that, he peeled off one of his heavy, black, disgusting-looking gloves, and took Scott’s hand, and said a prayer.

When Scott finally came back inside the cabin, his wife asked, “What took you so long?”

“Jesus. Jesus, and his meddling ways.”<sup>2</sup>

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Now...I don’t own a septic tank.

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God’s Justice*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022.

And I don't own a cabin in the woods.

But I do own a heart that needs cleaning.

I do have a soul that needs repentance, and renewal, and grace.

And I was going to suggest that we could find those gifts if we all head to the Jordan River this Advent and spend some time with John.

But you know what?

I changed my mind.

I changed my mind because I've got a better place for us to go.

If you're looking for a place

where every child of God is welcome,

where people will walk with you in your weakness,

where repentance is prized,

and God's grace is found in abundance,

I hope you know you don't have to go to the Jordan River  
to find those gifts.

This Christmas, the people who will offer you those gifts...

are seated in this room with you right now.

Amen.