

Third Sunday of Advent, Year B

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

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I was a bit of a late bloomer in the dating scene. I was in a small town for high school, and I was in another small town for college, so it wasn't really until I was 22 and living in Chicago that I even went out at all. I was hopeless. I had no idea what I was doing, and I was sort of insecure about how I looked and how pathologically uncool I was. If you want to stop a conversation in its tracks, go to a gay bar in 2002 and tell everyone that you're studying to be a priest and see how far that gets you.

One weekend, an old friend came to visit, and he declared that we were going to go out. I wasn't so sure. Couldn't we order takeout and maybe watch a movie? My friend Vance insisted that we were going to get dressed up and get our butts out on the dance floor, and so that's exactly what we did.

I remember we were sitting in a little bar that was called, ironically, Rehab, and Vance was giving me the business about how I should sit, how I should flirt, and even who I should be taking an interest in. It was a real master class in finding a date before smartphones sort of made that all go away.

And, I have to admit, having a wingman at the bar was pretty great. Vance was sort of getting my self-esteem in a good place and teaching me what I needed to know to survive in the wilds of Chicago nightlife. And I got some numbers. I wouldn't say that I met a soulmate or anything, but I had a really good time, and I found that I had desperately needed the instruction. Vance was a little harsh at times, but he always was trying hard to get me out of my own complacency. And, if we looked a little more closely at my complacency, really, it had a lot to do with different fears I had. Fears of rejection. Fears of inadequacy. Fears of societal disapproval. Just pick one. And Vance swooped into my life and helped me find my courage.

Which, is, of course, what John the Baptist—ultimate wingman—is doing today. He is trying to shake up the disciples in his time, to get them off their sofas and out into the world. He is trying to prepare them for the ministry of Jesus, the one who is coming.

When I was that 22-year-old student at the seminary, I never really imagined that I'd give a sermon wherein I compared John the Baptist to a gay wingman, but stranger things have happened in the history of the world, and I'm a little in love with the image of John standing there, telling you to get your butt on the dance floor and to leave all those silly fears behind. I like the idea of John standing there, telling you to get to LIVING, get to the good stuff, and to ignore all the stupid little things that keep us on the couch.

Or, in the words of St. Paul, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do

not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

Advent is the season to get a little bit jarred out of the reverie that so often takes hold of us. These four weeks are meant to invite a spiritual inventory with the help of the prophets and madmen like John the Baptist. Looking inside is often a little painful. That’s why we don’t like to do it. But with some help from our spiritual forebears, I think we might just find the courage to do the work of preparing ourselves for the coming birth of Jesus.

If the Christmas carols are to be believed, love comes down at Christmas and God is looking to be born—not just in a manger—but in us. The God-child is seeking a home, and for most of us, we will need to do a little preparation to get ready for that kind of event. I don’t know about you, but my internal life at any given moment could use a little help from John the Baptist so that I can keep my mind focused on the things that are important and dump out the things that are not.

This story could have easily started with the birth of Jesus and then later his ministry. But, and I find this fascinating every Advent, in our tradition, someone like John needed to come and do the work before the work. It’s pretty easy to be grateful for the cute little baby in the manger who has come in glory to change the world. It’s a little harder to be grateful for the coarse man who shows up at our house, eating locusts and honey, and starts telling us to rearrange the furniture and to start living the lives we know we should be living. Or in my case, Vance who tells me that I need to get out into the world and live a little, to flirt and laugh and be grateful for the gift of being alive and, at that time at least, young.

Sometimes we really do need a kick in the pants, and even though our Advent story is complicated and layered with different meanings, it really comes down to a crazy man in the wilderness telling us to pay attention, to wake up, to get our houses ready for Jesus, who is coming.

So, spend some time this week with John the Baptist—your biblical wingman. The one who will hold a mirror up to your life, who will tell you some truths that you probably need to hear, and who will give you the energy you need to get your spiritual house ready for Christmas. And once John has finished that work on an individual level, he will move on to help us collectively—as a church, as a community, as a nation, and as a world. Because, you know as well as I do that the world is aching right now. Globally, we are not living into the values that we espouse on Sunday mornings. Bombs fall, children are displaced and worse, leaders are impotent, and so much seems bleak.

But John has come to wake us up, to make us see what is real, and to encourage us to live those values of peace and of justice that Jesus will embody at Christmas. It’s a huge task, and it requires a big personality. But I think John is just the man for the job. May John come into our homes this Advent, shake us up, and send us into the world to prepare it to be a place worthy of the Prince of Peace. Amen.