

**2 Advent A**

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**Fruitless Trees**

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For several years, all my father wanted for his birthday was a wolf river apple tree. My father loves to plant trees; in fact, one of his hobbies is tree farming, and someday you can ask me about the spring vacation I spent helping plant 5000 seedlings (spoiler alert: it isn't as charming or delightful as it might sound). But the reason my father wanted wolf river apple trees had nothing to do with his tree farming hobby.

Wolf River apples originated on the shores of the Wolf River in the 1870's in a little town in Wisconsin called Fremont, not far from Waupaca, where I grew up. Fremont is where my great-grandmother (my father's grandmother's) family is from, so for my father Wolf River apples had a positive family connection, as he was very close to his grandmother.

The trouble was, no matter how many Wolf River apple trees we bought and my dad planted, none of them ever produced any fruit. Which is odd because Wolf River apple trees have a reputation for being hearty, disease resistant, and are known for being fruitful; producing lots of incredibly large apples full of flavor, perfect for eating, baking, making apple butter and apple sauce. There is a Wolf River apple tree in my hometown that is over 125 years old and it still is producing fruit. By the way, I recently discovered Wolf River apples are popular in Southern Appalachia too. But my father didn't have any luck with his Wolf River apple trees.

He made sure to follow the directions about how and where to plant the trees to the letter. He never used chemicals on them. Watered them by hand when it was too dry. Fretted and worried over them when it was too rainy. But no matter what he did or didn't do, my father's Wolf River apple trees never produced a single apple. It was disappointing and discouraging for him. Eventually every Wolf River apple tree my dad planted ended up a dead skinny stick in the yard that was removed and thrown away. He had plenty of other fruit trees that produced and still produce pears, plums, and other kinds of apples, but the failure to produce fruit from the Wolf River apple trees made my father swear off planting any more of them.

Producing fruit is what the out-spoken prophet John the Baptist talked about in our Gospel today. Except he was obviously not talking about apples or even oranges, he was talking about fruit with Biblical overtones: fruit worthy of repentance.

To help us understand what John the Baptist meant, we have to go back a bit to the Old Testament days when prophets would rise up on occasions and have words for God's People. First, it is important for us to remember that, at least as far as the Bible is concerned, prophets are not soothsayers nor fortune tellers. They were not predictors of the end of the world, which is a popular misconception. The prophets from the Old Testament were people who pointed God's People back to God. If you read some of the stories about prophets you'd see they were often disliked, treated terribly, and occasionally killed for their efforts, although there are a few exceptions. That's because the prophets of God had the difficult job of speaking truth to power. It was the calling of a prophet to tell the People of God when they had wandered away from following God and needed to change and go back to God or things would not go well for them. This wasn't predicting the future as much as it was like being a relationship coach, pointing out that in the People's relationship with God, they had certain expectations and responsibilities and God had certain expectations and responsibilities and when the People broke their covenant agreement with God (which is how their relationship with God was understood in the Old Testament), they could expect consequences to the poor choices they made.

Often God would step in and offer to right things between God and God's People by renewing the covenant by sending a prophet who would attempt to bring the situation to the people's attention, then call for the people to repent.

Repent is a good Old Testament word that means to change. It literally means a change of heart or to change one's mind to turn from doing one thing and change and do something not only different but better. It is part of the process of transformation that was intended to be part of how the people of God returned to God after they had strayed.

In the Old Testament, prophets rarely had a specific activity they wanted the people to do to show repentance. They didn't ask individuals to sign petitions or take part in protests. Nor were they innovators who found new ways to meet the needs of a group of people. Instead they were more concerned with the larger picture of an entire nation's compliance to following God's ways, and allowing their belief in God to influence every decision the People made.

This meant they often addressed the people as a group along with the leaders, pointing out bad behaviors and reminding them of how God wanted them to behave. They often left the decision of how to respond to the people, who would either suffer the consequences of not listening or the benefits of returning to a right relationship with God if they listened and changed. These benefits were more about living as the authentic People of God and were not necessarily material rewards.

Into that tradition stepped John the Baptist, who is at the start of all 4 of the Canonical Gospels, and who we always encounter the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of Advent. He is a powerful figure who reminds us of the prophets of old like Elijah with his strange attire and habits. His was also a voice the people of Jesus' era hadn't heard in a long time, and his intention was to get their attention, just like the prophets of old.

But the message of John the Baptist wasn't exactly the same as that of the Old Testament prophets. John the Baptist did call for repentance, but not conditional repentance. He did not demand the people repent so God's wrath would be averted or to repent so they could honor a covenant agreement. John the Baptist called people to repent because the Kingdom of Heaven, called the Kingdom of God in other Gospels, had come near. John was not talking about life after death, John was talking about God bringing God's Kingdom like we heard in our beautiful reading in Isaiah often called the Peaceable Kingdom, to where the people were. It wasn't coming, someday, it was already near. God wasn't going to bring the Kingdom, God had already brought it.

So, the call to repent isn't about coaxing God to bring God's Kingdom. The call to repent is the call to participate in that which God made present.

As I said, this was a new message for a prophet, which might be why John the Baptist got so much attention from the people and from the religious leaders who all came to check him out. Notice John the Baptist didn't greet those religious leaders very nicely. He called them snakes, not harmless garden snakes but venomous vipers who had the power to take life from someone they bit. He accused them of being like my father's Wolf River apple trees: fruitless consumers of the good things they have been given, and warned them they were about to be cut down, destroyed, because they were not part of God's Kingdom, which was near. One of the characteristics of Matthew's Gospel is that the religious leaders

get a lot of criticism like this, which can be a relief for some folks because that might mean the people who are held accountable are just the religious leaders. So, I guess we priests and deacons and bishops should be squirming and the rest of you are off the hook.

But this prejudice against religious leaders is emphasized only in Matthew's Gospel, in other Gospels it was the whole crowd who got the brood of viper treatment from John the Baptist. And even in Matthew's Gospel the call to bear fruit worthy of repentance is for everyone; because whether or not a person is ordained, John the Baptist's call is for everyone to be part of God's Kingdom not someday, but every day. Even today.

Which might be why the Church gives us John the Baptist's message in this season of Advent. As I said last week, Advent isn't just a time to prepare for Christmas, it is a season of beginning a new Church Year, of beginning the story of faith once again, so that we not only know the story of faith, but so we can live into that story. Today's part of the story is a rich, full reminder that John the Baptist announced how God was up to something new, and invited all people into a new relationship with God, a new covenant through Jesus. We refer to this new Covenant every time we celebrate Holy Communion, especially when the priest says the words of Jesus: "This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which was shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."

John the Baptist reminds us we are called to live into this new relationship, this Kingdom of Heaven, not just be passive receivers of it. Yet if we were paying attention to the lovely reading from Isaiah we might be quick to point out that vision has not been fully realized, there is still plenty of violence and inequality and injustice and suffering in the world. And that is why I love the season of Advent so much. We wouldn't have a season like it if the Kingdom was fully realized, would we, because we wouldn't need it. But we do need it; we need the reminder that the Kingdom is near and we are invited to be part of it by bearing fruit, fruit we produce from eating up God's love and drinking in God's grace. And whenever someone does this, whenever someone is generous, forgiving, healing, joyful and hopeful, we can see the Kingdom, even if it might be just a glimpse.

The choice to participate in the Kingdom, as always, is ours to make. And Advent is a chance to consider our Biblical fruit of repentance, to examine what fruit we produce: it is critical, angry, resentful, bitter, ignorant fruit of despair or is it the fruit of forgiveness, healing, hope and joy? If we happen to notice we aren't producing the type of fruit we'd hope, we can consider what needs to be done to

repent. Are we choked by weeds or rubbish like drama or anxiety that are sucking our energy and need to be cleaned out? Are we dry from lack of life-giving nourishment from God and can turn to prayer or worship or spiritual direction? Perhaps there are changes of heart we can all make that will take a step further into the Kingdom of Heaven, where we produce the fruits of God's love and no one is cut down, and the Kingdom of Heaven can grow a little closer to us all.