

Matthew 3:1-12
Peace Can't Wait
Advent 2
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What Can't Wait?

I learned this week that one answer to that question is Millennials. Millennials can't wait. According to the Society for Human Resources Management, while previous generations have had a disdain for waiting in line for the next career move, Millennials have the lowest threshold for waiting to climb the corporate ladder. They are fully prepared to and expect to move on if promotions are delayed (<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/why-millennials-hate-waiting-and-what-hr-can-do-about-it.aspx>). In addition, Millennials generally prefer immediate, regular job performance feedback, rather than waiting for the more traditional end of the year evaluation (<https://www.businessinsider.com/millennials-habits-different-from-baby-boomers-2018-3#instead-of-keeping-their-salary-secret-millennials-may-share-it-with-coworkers-4>). Other areas in which research has found Millennials have a low tolerance for waiting are retail lines, food delivery, and the ways in which information is passed on to them. They prefer online access, rather than in-person lectures, presumably so they can skip information they deem irrelevant. Honestly, who doesn't prefer that? Some of you are wishing this sermon was in an online format.

I am aware that this type of research can be helpful, but has a tendency to overgeneralize the group in question. I am truly fascinated by the amount of research that has been done on this generation of people who are now 23-38 years old. My kids are in this age range and, while they go at life in their own ways, I wouldn't say they are so different as to require intense study. Researchers, and anyone trying to market anything, have doggedly pursued the answer to, "What makes Millennials tick?" Even churches want to know what's up with Millennials as they are less likely to be part of a faith community than previous generations. During their research for the book *Sacred Roots : Why the Church Still Matters*, the Barna Group asked Millennials who said church is not important to indicate why that is.

A significant number of Millennials have more than surface level complaints about church. 35% say their negative perceptions are a result of moral failures in church leadership. And 87% of Millennials who don't go to church say they see Christians as judgmental, 85% say Christians are hypocritical, 91% believe Christians are anti-LGBTQ+, and 70% believe Christians are insensitive to others.

<https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>

I have shared studies with findings like this with you before. Millennials, and I would guess a good number from the generation that followed them, Generation Z, have a fairly negative impression of Christianity, especially with regard to how we treat people who are different from us or who don't believe what we say we believe. In other words, just as the survey points out, we have a reputation for being judgmental and adults in their 20's and 30's especially don't have time for that.

Coincidentally, there are a whole bunch of us in this room who are here trying to recover from Christian judgment. Members of the LGBTQ+ community are recovering from churches that misinterpret the Bible with regard to sexuality and gender identity. Some of us who are divorced and remarried are recovering from churches that refuse to bend on what they consider the "sanctity of marriage." And the ones in this room with more questions than answers are recovering from being told that asking questions and not believing the right things represents a lack of faith and lands a person in a more than tropical environment for eternity.

What I have often observed in progressive faith communities is that we avoid talking about judgment altogether. We don't want to be lumped in with "those other churches," so we talk a lot about how God loves everybody, even when we are really bad at life. I kind of think the message of God's love being for everyone can't be overstated. All of this to say, I am pretty certain you, Millennial or not, did not come here hoping for a sermon on judgment, especially since we are in the midst of Advent, the time of year when, as I mentioned last week, you come expecting stories of angels, shepherds, and of course, the baby Jesus.

When I saw the text chosen for today, I thought, "Man, I cannot catch a break." This is Matthew 3:1-25:

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do 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. ¹⁰Even 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.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John was a colorful, “live at the margins,” “tell it like it is,” kind of guy. In the Jewish tradition, he was associated with the prophet, Elijah, who was expected to come back to earth before the arrival of the Messiah. Both John and Elijah hung out in the wilderness, harshly critiqued powerful people, and were known to eat food even worse than the keto diet. This text is full of judgment, basically calling out the behavior of the people of Judea, including the religious leaders who were more concerned about appearances than God. The baby Jesus is nowhere in this story. Rather, this story announces the arrival, not of “the little lord Jesus asleep on the hay,” but of bearded, grown-up Jesus who, like John, came with a serious message about the kin-dom of God.

For John, that message begins with judgment. Someone does not walk around telling people to repent if there isn’t something from which to repent. Judgment, in this context, is not so much about longing for punishment as it is about truth-

telling. To be clear, the ways in which churches have cast judgment on some of us sitting in this room are not examples of truth-telling. They are examples of churches interpreting the Bible poorly and hurting people because of it. There are times, though, when truth-telling is bad news and sounds like, “Dear one, look at all the people you have hurt.” Sometimes it is good news, when our pain is acknowledged, “Beloved, look at how you have been hurt.” In both cases, the message for all of us is that we are responsible for our actions, and what we do matters. It has to. If what we do doesn’t matter to God, then do we matter to God?

One December afternoon...a group of parents stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session. As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in their hands the “surprise,” the brightly wrapped package on which they had been working diligently for weeks. One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents, all at the same time, slipped and fell. The “surprise” flew from his grasp, landed on the floor and broke with an obvious ceramic crash.

The child...began to cry inconsolably. His father, trying to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured, “Now that’s all right son. It doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t matter at all.” But the child’s mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, “Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.” And she wept with her son. (William Muehl, *Why Preach, Why Listen?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, 82.)

It matters. It all matters. The message of John the Baptist reminds us that what we do matters a great deal and when what we are doing does not align with the ways of God, when it hurts other people, we need to do things differently. But the other part of John’s message is that even as we veer from God’s ways, God is loving us and gathering us to Godself right now. There is an urgency about John’s story, “Change your life. God’s kin-dom is here, now.”

In this story, there is a reference to Isaiah 40 when John proclaims:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

He stops there, but Matthew’s audience would have known what came next:

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

This passage invites us to imagine the biblical concept of *shalom*, loosely translated as peace. Peace is about much more than an absence of violence; it is about justice and righteousness in all areas of life for all of God’s creation. In Isaiah’s vision, God’s desire for shalom is revealed to everyone, “...all people shall see it together,” which is the way shalom works. I cannot have peace if you do not have peace. We are all deeply connected. John calls us to turn from that which disconnects us from God and from one another and work together to bring about the kin-dom of God. Why?

Because peace can’t wait.

Lately, we’ve spent a lot of time talking about how Isaiah understood God’s vision for the world. Have you thought about your vision for the world? Would any one of us envision a world where people go hungry, where human beings kill other human beings, where children sleep in the cold, or can’t see a doctor when they need one? Would we envision a world where some people have a lot and others have nothing? Of course not. We would, in our own ways, envision shalom, a world at peace. We might describe it differently than Isaiah did, but we would see a world where parents slept peacefully at night, knowing their children were safe and warm. We would see a world where strangers were met with warmth and hospitality, not harsh hostility. We would see a world of harmony and sharing and abundance. And if we could choose, we would want that world to come to be right now, wouldn’t we? We would want that because we know that every day the world waits, all of creation suffers. Peace can’t wait.

John’s story reminds us that we are responsible for what we do and what we do impacts the world. What we do matters. I read a short essay this week by Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winning playwright Tony Kushner. His essay, titled, “Despair is a Lie We Tell Ourselves,” spoke to me as I reflected on my own vision for the world and what it means for us to do be peacemakers in it. I would like to share

part of it with you. (*The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*, Paul Rogat Loeb)

“A Chicago cab driver recently told me, ‘If there’s a supernova sixty light-years away from here, the world will be totally wiped out. We don’t stand a chance.’ He gave me something to think about, namely the fact that life, each individual life and our collective life on the planet is a teleological game. It is not infinite. It has an ending, and so the future you put your faith in is not, in fact, limitless.

Given the catastrophic failure to seriously address global warming, given the sagging of the world’s economy and the refusal to see any solutions beyond making poor people suffer even more than they always do in the hopes of reviving a market that only ever revives long enough to make the rich richer, given a Supreme Court that gives corporations more rights than people, well, its sort of optimistic to believe it’s a supernova that is going to get us. It’s clear that what’s much more likely to get us, if we are got, is our present condition of living in a world run by scoundrels while the people of the world either have no access to power or have forgotten how to get it and why it is important to have it.” Kushner goes on to talk about how he does not believe the wicked always win and that he does believe ordinary citizens need to show up, do the work, and change the world. He says, “Not any single one of us has to or can possibly save the world, but together in some sort of concert, in even not-especially-coordinated concert, with all of us working where we see work to be done, the world will change. And we have to do it by showing up places...turn off the (bleeping) computers, leave the Web and the Net---and show up, our bodies at meetings and demos and rallies and leafleting corners.”

He closes with this, “So when the supernova comes to get us, we won’t be disappointed in ourselves. We should hope to be able to say proudly to the supernova, the angel of death, ‘Hello supernova, we have been expecting you, we know all about you, because in our schools we teach science and not creationism, and so we have been expecting you, everywhere and everyone has been expecting you, except Texas. And we would like to say, supernova, in the moment before we are returned by your protean fire to our previous state, clouds of incandescent atomic vapor, we’d like to declare that we have tried our best and worked hard to make a good and just and free and peaceful world, a world that is better for our having been here...”

In these days of waiting and preparing to celebrate Christmas, I think it's appropriate for us to consider John the Baptist's cry in the wilderness, his announcement of Jesus' coming ministry. Because the truth is, it wasn't Jesus' birth that changed the world. It was his life. It was his willingness to show up, stand up, and speak up for justice, compassion, and peace. He knew it then and we know it today. Peace can't wait.

Amen.