

Metanoia

Isaiah 11:1-10 & Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday of Advent/ 4th December 2022

The Second Sunday of Advent is given over to John the Baptist. The spotlight is on him out there in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming a word of warning. It's a message that doesn't seem to fit this time of year. Who wants to hear, "Repent, you brood of vipers, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Mt. 3:2) in December? And yet, the Church, in its wisdom, was wise to focus on John during Advent because we know how so difficult it is for us to stay in Advent without rushing headlong into Christmas. Something needs to change in us. If we are going to prepare the way of the Lord, a shift is required.

Metanoia. This is how the early Church described it. I was told in seminary never to use Greek in a sermon. I've ignored that recommendation for nearly thirty-five years. *Metanoia.* "Repent" or "repentance" is the way it's often (inadequately) translated into English. *Metanoia* is about a "change in your way of knowing." Another way of knowing is needed because the current way is inadequate for what is coming. The advent of the Lord requires something *of* us and *in* us—*all the time. Meta-*. Change. Changed minds, hearts, and eyes. A changed way of living. *Meta-*minds, hearts, *eyes*, ways. For the reign, realm, kingdom, empire of God's justice and grace is near. Prepare your heart, mind, *eyes*—because if you're not paying attention, you will miss the kingdom, you will miss the advent of the Lord. And it's easy to miss because God has a way of appearing in unlikely places, as in a baby in a manger. This is why we need the spirit of the Baptist. For what was true for John along the Jordan is always true for us. Someone is coming. It's why theologian Karl Barth (1888-1868) claimed that for the Christian, *Advent is the only time.*

John is calling for a shift in awareness. He's calling us to pay attention, which is not easy. N. Katherine Hayles, professor of psychology at Duke University, has done groundbreaking research on how attention works in us. She says there are at least two types of attention: *hyper* and *deep*; both are vital. Hyper attention is rooted in the oldest parts of the brain that remembers what's needed to survive, anticipating possible threats and sudden attacks, hoping to outrun predators and other dangers. Hyper attention is vigilant, it's always "on," nervously alert. "Hyper attention excels at negotiating rapidly changing environments," Hayles explains, "in which multiple foci compete for attention" when we're playing sports, such as soccer, or driving on the beltway. Teachers use it all day in the classroom.

Deep attention is the ability to focus on something without being distracted by knee-jerk reactions or assumptions. "Deep attention...is characterized," Hayles explains, "by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a Dickens novel), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times."¹ Both are needed to live. One is easier to attain than the other, depending upon one's temperament. Deep attention leads, though, us into the depths. It's related to intuition, which enables us to know and see what is not immediately apparent or evident. If we're easily distracted, closed-minded, close-hearted, blind, we will miss what's in front of us and what is coming toward us.

Of the two, deep attention is less developed in us and, in many respects, more valuable. British psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist has shown in his groundbreaking research and writings that attention informs what we bring to bear on the world. He insists, even warns, what we give attention to, and what we attend to changes what kind of things come into being for us. What we attend to changes us and changes the world.² This is *metanoia*. Attention matters.

John the Baptist learned deep attention from a long line of seers, poets, prophets, and visionaries who came before him, who were attentive to the “new thing” the Spirit of God is always about in the world, whether we know it or not. John placed himself within the tradition of Isaiah, who, hundreds of years before, could see what others could not see.

Look at that dead tree stump, Isaiah says.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, a branch shall grow out of its roots” (Is. 11:1). Out of dead—or seemingly dead places like a tree stump, a root will break forth, and new life will emerge. *Embedded in the heart of all things is a generative force bringing about a new future for God’s people.* This “root” of Jesse is alive and runs deep through a special child of God upon whom dwells the spirit of God, “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD” (Is. 11:2-3). Isaiah offered hope when others could only see judgment and sorrow; he saw redemption and restoration in a time of exile in Babylon; he envisioned God at work in a new way during a time of political oppression and cultural alienation; he could see a future emerge in a place of destruction, decay, and devastation; he offered hope when there was no reason to be hopeful. A prophet who invited people to go deep, he warned us not to get distracted by things or become seduced by the surface appearance of things. Pay attention, and you will see something grow where you would never expect or suspect it. John knew what Isaiah knew.

The coming of Jesus, both then and now, requires a radical change of perception, a shift. *Metanoia*. The advent of Jesus always brings about a new age, a new day, and a new season in our lives and the world. This means that the advent of Jesus always means the ending of something—which is why Jesus is always a threat to those who prefer the *status quo*, who prefer to keep things as they are. His presence marks the ending of one day and the beginning of another, the end of one season and the beginning of something new. You can’t have one without the other. An ending and a beginning. A beginning which is also an ending. Change. Repentance. *Metanoia*. Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

¹ Cited in Maryann McKibben Dana, *God, Improv, and the Art of Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 70-71.

² Iain McGilchrist, *Ways of Attending: How Our Divided Brain Constructs the World* (London: Routledge, 2019). McGilchrist develops this idea in *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) and, more recently, *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmasking of the World: Volume I – The Ways to Truth* (London: Perspective Press, 2021), 17-27.