

The phone rings. You pick it up and say “Hello” and on the other end of the line, you hear somebody say, “Hey! How are you doing?” Instantly you know exactly who it is and you begin chatting away the time. How did you know who it was? You recognized their voice! There are certain people whose voice we know so well that as soon as we hear their voice on the phone, hear their voice cheering on the team, or even hear their voice in a crowded room we know exactly who it is because we recognize their voice. But in order for us to get to the point where we can recognize someone simply by hearing their voice at least one of two things needs to occur. Either there needs to be something unique about their voice or we need to be very familiar with that person.

Today, my friends, as we continue to prepare our hearts and our lives during this Advent season, we once again come into contact with the voice of someone who is uniquely associated with this particular season of the year. That individual’s name is John the Baptist. This morning I would like us to hear afresh the familiar words of Matthew chapter three by attending to the prophetic voice of John, *“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”*

John the Baptist is perhaps one of the best-known characters in Bible history. We know him as the babe who leaped in his mother’s womb when Mary came to visit. We know him as the forerunner of Christ whom God called to prepare the way for Jesus’ coming. But most of all we remember John because of the message that he preached in the desert of Judea. *“Repent...for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”* If ever there were a message and a messenger clearly identifiable with each other, it is John the Baptizer and the call to repentance. There were, of course, a number of things that set John apart from the other religious leaders of his day and age. Scripture describes him as a man whose *“clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.”* But the voice of John calling people to repent of their sins is by far the most striking.

Nancy Topolewski tells about receiving a call from Jan, her dearest college friend; a friend of more than 25 years who could barely contain her excitement, as she relayed a wonderful message over the phone. “We’re expecting a baby!” Nancy says, I could not help but rejoice with her because Jan had waited until she was almost 40 to get married. She couldn’t find Mr. Right, either in college or in the various places she had worked after graduation. She seemed to be heading for a life of active single-ness. Until she met Barry. Then, suddenly, everything changed. Jan was so sure that “He Was the One” that she sold her condo; Barry didn’t renew the lease on his place. They went house shopping and found a place they could afford. They told their families. They told their friends. They planned a wedding. By the time the ceremony actually took place, the love between them had grown and deepened to a level that left no doubt about their commitment to one another.

A wedding is one thing. Having a baby in their mid-40s is entirely another. Nancy says, “I did not learn until much later what difficult obstacles stood in the way of Jan and Barry’s conceiving a child. I only knew, when Jan called to tell me of her pregnancy, that the two of them were ecstatic—and understandably cautious. “Please pray for us,” Jan asked. “Pray for a healthy baby, carried to term. Pray for our hope and joy.” “Pray for our hope and joy?” I understood then that Jan was not only carrying within her an unborn child. She and Barry were carrying their love and desire for a family, and so much

more, within their hearts. They were expecting, pregnant, hopeful and joyful.”

Although it might not appear to be so at first glance, John the Baptist is talking about being pregnant, expectant, hopeful and joyful—an exciting message. Matthew tells us that some people have come to see John because of his celebrity status. He’s the latest popular preacher, right here in our town! What an opportunity! Many others have come, in contrast, with more serious purpose. They are not satisfied with their lives or the world in which they are living. They come because they believe changes need to be made. They come because they have not given up. They are really the ones who are pregnant with hope and expectant with joy.

John targets everyone with his message. The focus is not on John himself; that much is clear from the way he dresses, the food he eats, the way he smells, the way he talks. John does not take credit for something great and wonderful that he is clearly a part of. It’s hard for us not to take credit for good or great things. He wastes no words. He baptizes one person after another, day after day after day, strengthening the hope of those who have never given up.

Hope is a precious commodity, one that can be relinquished or lost in many ways; one that falls as easy prey to the twists and turns of life-circumstances. Joy, like hope, can be very powerful to start, but somewhere along the road from where we have been to where we are going, we often lose our joy in discouragement and frustration. What we encounter makes it difficult to maintain hope and joy—particularly with respect to financial realities, social ills and world issues. Joy can be shut down at the point of thinking we are at the end of the road, when in reality our goal still lies ahead—like students who graduate thinking that education is complete when handed a piece of paper.

Those who have no hope do not come to John. Why should they? After all, they tell themselves, this world will always be the same, forever and ever, amen. With nothing to look forward to, they stay clear of the River Jordan. Those who consider that their lives of holiness have attained perfection do not come to John, either. That is, not until they begin to see John as a threat to their comfortable way of life. When the hope and joy of others becomes too much, they appear at the Jordan to cover their bets. John watches these Pharisees and Sadducees watching him, and calls them out: *“You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee God’s coming wrath?”* (v. 7). Then, perhaps because he has figured out what they are thinking, John adds: *“Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones”* (v. 9). To put it in today’s terms: Your comfortable church life, your baptism, your church membership, your Sunday offerings don’t much matter if your life hasn’t changed! *“Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God”* John says.

We can imagine the good religious folks bristling with indignation. They have a good life. They occupy positions of privilege. They will fight tooth and nail to defend the stability and security of their way of life. And anyway, who is this maniac with the filthy clothes and a wild appearance to tell them what God does or does not expect? A big confrontation is not far around the corner. The pregnancy of hope and expectancy of joy is for those who repent.

The text places a choice before us: To which group do we belong? Are we among those who have given

up, who do not come to John at all? Are we people who have hardened our hearts and really do not want to change? Or are we standing by the Jordan, pregnant, expecting, hopeful, hearing God's voice speaking through John, looking for a new life, a fresh start?

Jan and Barry, Nancy's friends, said little about the baby they hoped to bring into the world, out of the realistic possibility that at their ages, they might not go to term. With each passing day, as their unborn child grew, so did their hope. When their daughter Rebecca Faith was born—a healthy, beautiful baby girl—it was as if heaven and earth had come together and were shouting for joy!

Are we pregnant, expecting, hopeful, today—with Advent's hope and joy, with John the Baptist's vision, expecting that God's kingdom is coming to earth? Are we? *"I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals" says John. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (v. 11).

Sometimes I pick up the phone and an unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line asks if I am Mr. McDonald, not Karl, not Pastor, but Mr. McDonald. Almost automatically the thought goes through my mind, "Oh, no. Here we go again." I don't want to talk to that person. I don't even want to listen to them because they are usually trying to sell me something I either don't need or don't want.

The call that rings in our ears today, dear friends, is a call that we all need to hear. It is the voice of John the Baptist calling out to repent of our sins, to prepare our hearts and to prepare our lives so that we are indeed ready to meet our Savior and King. Let us be like the ones that John baptized in the Jordan—pregnant with hope and expectant with joy. And may God graciously grant that we will listen, truly listen, to the voice of John that brings hope and joy like no other. Amen.