

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 3:1-12

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72:1-7,18-19

Romans 15:4-13

December 8, 2019

The Second Sunday of Advent

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In my research on our readings for today, I ran across a sermon entitled, "Advent for Average Sinners." I must confess, I didn't read the entire sermon. The title said what I needed to here. It confirmed something I was already suspicious of...most of us are probably fairly average.

Sure, we live in a time where every kid gets a trophy, where we are told we are all winners (or at least we should be winners). It's a world where we often don't learn to fail. If we aren't the best, the most interesting, the funniest, with the biggest house and the coolest car, then the world around us says that we don't quite measure up.

It's an impossible standard. Because the truth is...we can't all be winners at least by the world's standards. We can't always succeed. We can't always be the image of the confident, strong and courageous individual who others esteem to be like. Try as we might, most of us are simply average sinners.

Don't get me wrong...that's not meant to be a put down. On the contrary, it's meant to say that somewhere in the middle...between the highs and lows, between the wins and the losses, is the everyday work of being human. It's who we are in the midst of our learning and growing, of our practicing to get it right and our resiliency when we get it wrong. It's the unsung work of 12 hour shifts, of caring for a sick child through an endless night, or sitting quietly with a friend who has just lost a spouse. It's the regular moments of human grace that more often than not define who we are. The things most people will never see. It's the average life that may hold the greatest gifts of all.

Now, if we read the news and listen to TV and social media...the people that stand out in those settings are the ones on the edges...those experiencing the huge successes that we long for or the painful failures we shake our heads at. We are told those are the folks we should either be like or that we shouldn't be like. But, if I ask you about the people who made a difference in your life, more often than not, they would be your average, every day sinners. The people who showed up time and time again, working hard, not looking for praise, but diligent in serving and loving and making a humble, steady difference in this world. They didn't make the headlines but they made a difference.

This is the image I initially got when I spent time thinking about John the Baptist. When we encounter him in Matthew he simply appears. Out of nowhere, he emerges from the wilderness. And...he is, at that point in time, pretty average. He doesn't put on any airs. The images we have of John the Baptist in art show him as a bit disheveled with messy hair and unkempt clothing. He slouches. He's generally what you might call rough around the edges.

We know nothing about him. The Gospel of Matthew tells us nothing of what John has done, where he is from, who his family is, what he has accomplished. Other Gospels give us a little more background on him but Matthew is vague. You might say there is nothing extraordinary about this guy. If we saw him around town, we might not even notice him.

And yet, this is person God chose to prepare the way for Jesus, an average every day sinner just like you and me. God tends to love us just the way we are, with no accolades to our name, with no grand show of popularity or success, with no impressive background or experience. God takes our averageness and says every piece of it has value and goodness and purpose. We are God's beloved creation just as we are.

But, God is God afterall and God tends to shake things up when we least expect it. God says...you know what? I do love you just as you are because I created you. And because I created you, I know your potential. I know your goodness. I know your purpose.

That's when the call comes.

We can only imagine what John experienced when his call came. Out of wherever he had been, whatever he had been doing. His unremarkable, quiet life was formed into a powerful ministry that God knew was possible and because God knew it was possible, God loved him into being. And man, did he preach. The humble, inexperienced, unremarkable man became one of our greatest biblical figures, setting out to do what no one else had done before him.

I think we all yearn to be called out of the wilderness like John, to be valued for the person we already are and for the person we will continue to become.

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards."

I take that to mean that we have to stop living for the things that hold us captive...other people's opinions, other people's standards, other people's expectations. We have to stop regretting what we didn't do or didn't achieve. Because when we live for worldly approval, the bar will always be somewhere out in front of us, never obtained, never satisfying our real needs. So, if you have been stuck there, learn from it and move on.

Live forward. Embrace God's expectations. Because all of us average, every day sinners are called to do great things to make the way for Jesus.

So, this week, I want you to consider your call. Consider how the light of Christ is moving in your heart and calling you out of the wilderness. Leave the past in the past so that you may approach your future with an open heart and eager mind. Allow God to show you how to make way for Jesus. Amen.

