

Sermon preached on December 5, 2021 – Second Sunday of Advent

By The Rev. Anne C. Fowler

St Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Yarmouth, ME

Malachi 3: 1-4

Canticle 16

Philippians 1:3-11

Luke 3: 1-6

Advent II St. Bart's

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Luke 3:7

I am so down with the Baptizer! I love, love, love him. I mean, I love Jesus, I really do. I worship him, as a matter of fact. I aspire and strive to emulate Jesus more and more.

But the Baptizer has a very special place in my heart and in my psyche. I don't have to try very hard to emulate him. *Oh, Anne's righteous anger*, a parishioner in my first job exclaimed. Or *complained* maybe. And this was after a sermon in which I was not aware of being particularly angry. When my rector in that first job asked me what I wanted as a gospel reading for my ordination, my first thought was, *I come not to bring peace, but a sword*. Gee, he said, *that sounds kind of angry*.

I suppose it did. But that's the Jesus I could relate to, then. I like to think I've evened out some in the last 35 years. But then something happens and I'm right back with the Baptizer.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

And who are these vipers, you may ask. Well, most of the Supreme Court Justices, for example. And to widen the brood a good deal, I would include any man in the world who thinks he has a right to decide, to dictate, what any woman should do with her body.

I would include those who proposed a bill in our legislature last session that would have required any woman who had an abortion or a stillbirth to bury or cremate those remains and be fined \$10,000 if she failed to do so. Fined if she *couldn't afford* to do so. Fortunately that bill was kicked to the curb by our wise legislators. But the idea – I can't even.

Years ago I learned something from a friend and colleague, the ethicist Beverly Harrison, that has allowed me to understand myself and my anger in new and liberating ways. In an essay called *The Power of Anger in the Work of Love*, Bev writes,

"It is my thesis that we Christians have come very close to killing love precisely because anger has been understood as a deadly sin. Anger is not the opposite of love. It is better understood as a feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to other persons or groups or to the world around us. **Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring.**"

Anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring.

She goes on to say, "We must never lose touch with the fact that all serious human moral activity, especially action for social change, takes its bearings from the rising power of human anger. Such anger is **a signal that change is called for, that transformation in relation is required.**"

We all know this, though we may not have had the words or the framework for our understanding. Bev is not speaking about being pissed off at someone for an insult we may have received. I was lectured at during a meeting this week and it was a good thing we were on zoom or I would have wanted to punch her in the face. Well, I did want to, virtually.

That's not the kind of anger Bev's talking about. She's talking about being outraged at injustice. She is talking about the power of anger, as our Jewish cousins, say, to *tikkun olam* – *to repair the world*,

And that's the anger of John the Baptizer. He's a prophet, and he does what prophets do: he sees deeply into the brokenness of the world and tells us what to do to repair it. And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*

He doesn't say, *men, let women own their bodies*. It takes Jesus to say that, in defiance of every norm in his world. But John does say, *Even 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.*

Oh, that it were so! she said, angrily. But don't forget: *anger is a mode of connectedness to others and it is always a vivid form of caring.*

It is not only okay to be angry at injustice, at cruelty, at oppression. It's not only okay, it's necessary, it's imperative. But no anger without action, without movement, movement toward the repair of the world.

Another thing Bev Harrison told me that I will never forget: she said, *we are theologically committed to hope*. Yes, we are, *we are theologically committed to hope*.

And so is the Baptizer. *I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.*

And so this Advent, this time of waiting, let us wait in hope for the one who is coming, the light that shines in the darkness. But let us wait also for the righteous anger of John, who pierces the darkness like a meteor flashing across the sky. Alleluia, Alleluia! Amen.