

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

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Advent 2

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Happy second week of Advent, St Martin's!

Now let's imagine this scene. There's a guy wearing a hairy coat standing in the river shouting at people to repent. He eats grasshoppers and honey.

He insults the people coming to see him. And he warns people that there is an even more terrifying prophet coming after him, who will baptize them with fire.

Who would follow such a man?

Well, it seems that many people would. And if we step back a bit, we can see that many prophets, maybe even most prophets, look and act a bit different, they dress differently and do things to attract attention to themselves and say uncomfortable things no one wants to hear. The way John looked may even have made some folks believe in him more, since Moses and Elijah were described as looking and dressing in a similar way.

But the main reason people would have found John the Baptist compelling is his message. Times were bad, and people were suffering, and many people were aching for something new, they were aching for change.

The people probably found it especially compelling to see John targeting some of their leaders. Repent, you brood of vipers! The crowd must have loved hearing John call out the Pharisees and Sadducees. They must have loved hearing him call out Herod for marrying his brother's wife. Yes, tell those folks to repent!

I'm sure there are a few people we would like to see called out by a John the Baptist of today. Repent, you brood of vipers!

Repent, you masked agents seizing people and putting them in cages!

Repent, you who ordered bombings of boats in the Caribbean!

Repent, you who called an entire group of people garbage, and by the way, there is no such thing as a peace prize of soccer!

Oh, this is fun. Too fun, really.

John's message of repentance, his message of pruning the trees that are not bearing good fruit, his message is fun to sling at those "other" people, the "bad" people who are doing bad things. But the thing is, he was speaking to everyone, and his message is still speaking to everyone, to us, here today.

In this Advent season, when we are told by Jesus to be ready, we all need to take stock of ourselves, of our own trees and branches and roots, of what is bearing good fruit and what is not serving us or anyone else any more. We need to take stock, and do some pruning. Because now is not the time to be carrying around baggage that is just weighing us down. We need to repent, to turn another way.

Pruning, repentance, it may be about lightening our load, giving away our extra. I am going through a little of this right now as I get ready to move into the rectory, and find that even in a year I have accumulated some stuff I don't really need. For some here who are in a season of downsizing, you know that this isn't always an easy thing. But it often feels so much better once you do it.

Pruning, repentance, is also about the stuff inside us. Maybe we need to judge others a little less. Maybe we need to be less hard on ourselves. Maybe we need to let go of our need to fix others, even if our intentions are good.

Maybe we need to let go, even, let go, especially, of the idea that we are one of the "good" ones, that we are not the people who need to repent.

I had a big repentance moment years ago, courtesy of my own John the Baptist, our daughter Kennedy. She was about three at the time, and we were reading a children's book about slavery. I was already patting myself on the back for being a "good" white mom by trying to educate my Black daughter, and I knew this book would be hard, but I had no idea!

The book had pop-up and removable documents and artifacts to teach the history, and Kennedy had many questions as she took it all in. You mean they couldn't go to school? She asked. Who did this?

She asked. I tried to answer these questions as best I could.

Finally, with increasing shock and sudden awareness she blurted out, You killed my people! Now, what do you say to your child when they say something like this? I kind of just choked out, Yes, I guess so.

For the next several weeks, Kennedy was completely taken with this insight, and wherever we went, she had to call me to repentance. At the hairdresser -- She killed my people! At a party with other parents and kids -- She killed my people! I would just smile and shrug and sigh a bit and say, Yes, Kennedy, yes. It was quite uncomfortable, and it made quite the impression on our friends!

For those weeks, which seemed to go on forever, it was embarrassing and unsettling and just hard. It would have been so much easier to try to deny it. To say, Well no, my people came over through Ellis Island many years later, or some other excuse. But thank God I didn't avoid it or brush it aside, because that was a really formative moment for Kennedy in understanding who she is, and it was a turning point for me in owning my role in a story that is still going on today, a turning point in my letting go a little of my need to be one of the "good" ones.

Something inside me changed by facing the brunt of my daughter's accusation. It helped me to be able to take in other feedback. When as teenagers our daughters would call me out for being too sensitive, too fragile. When observing their world and their experiences showed me how really sheltered I had been.

I'm not holding this story up to say that I'm now all good. I'm still a work in progress. And I have to remember that, every time I am tempted to rant about how awful one of "those" people is, which is often! The work of repentance is uncomfortable and hard, but just like any pruning, just like downsizing and cleaning out the closets, it has been freeing too.

St Martin's, the work of repentance is hard and holy work. It is not only for ourselves, but for others. It is work that can help us see and know and love each other better, in all our particular identities and views and contexts. It is work that can bring us closer to being real community, beloved community. It is work that will help us to be open, to be aware, to be ready.

Repent, St Martin's, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Amen.