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“Where the Wild Things Are”

Of all the people you might invite over for Christmas dinner, John the Baptist is probably not one of them. You'll notice that he doesn't show up in the nativity scene, if he did, he'd be all scraggly and disheveled. There are no John the Baptist ornaments for the tree complete with hair shirt and digital recording shouting over and over again, “you brood of vipers, you brood of vipers!”

No, John does not fit the Christmas profile of calm and bright. Why is it then that year after year, amidst the preparations for Jesus' birth, John the Baptist appears front and center?

It's simple really, because as awkward as he is, John the Baptist is actually the embodiment of the Christmas message. In a season syrupy sweet with metaphor, there is nothing metaphoric about John's message; he is pissed and not shy about telling people that they have lost the plot!

Now, he will literally lose his head for that kind of honesty, but it cannot be ignored that John the Baptist understood himself as called by God to prepare the way for the arrival of the Jesus. Led by a righteous anger John's mission was to herald the need for repentance so that the people of Israel would wake up to their misguided ways and restore themselves to right relationship with God and with each other.

Once he had their attention, they asked him,

Luke 3:10-14, 18 "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. Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Be generous, don't take what isn't yours, and don't make life harder for vulnerable people. That is right living and that is what John the Baptist was about. It makes me wonder; what role does anger have to play in truth telling, and how do we, as people of faith, support the truth tellers among us?

Anger-defined as *a strong feeling of displeasure or belligerence aroused by a wrong*. How do you feel about anger, your own and the anger of others?

I was taught that it was something to be avoided and the tendency amongst most people is to pull away from someone who is expressing anger and to fear judgement or repercussion if we ourselves express it.

In a recent interview on the podcast On Being, Psychotherapist Avi Klien and journalist Rebecca Traister suggested that “Opening ourselves up to the experience of anger — trusting our own and also honoring others’ — is daunting and often painful. But it can also mark the beginnings of our healing.” They wondered what would happen if instead of retreating we learned to stand in the presence of anger, to open ourselves to it?

(Rebecca) Traister, a feminist journalist suggested, Listen to the people around you. Be curious about what they’re angry about. And then, when you ask, when you seek out their answers, listen to them. Consider them. Give them political weight. Give them intellectual weight. Imagine that the anger around you is a valid anger, as your anger is.”

You see, anger can serve as a kind of refiner’s fire- when faced with it one is encouraged (admittedly not always comfortably) to assess or reassess their grip on reality. John the Baptist used his anger that way- he used it to shock people into consciousness.

How do we determine if there is truth at the heart of what makes us angry, and when or under what circumstances might that anger be expressed in a constructive way? Our emotions reveal our values, motivations, strengths and needs. What does our anger tell the world about us?

This past week dozens of UCC ministers and lay leaders headed to the border to join what is being called the New Sanctuary Caravan. It is an effort to learn more about what people fleeing Central America are facing and what happens to them when they arrive at the border.

The delegation was initiated the day after U.S. Customs and Border Patrol fired tear gas on a crowd of migrants, primarily Honduran women and children, attempting to get through a border fence near Tijuana.

Tapping into a righteous anger aimed at demanding a return to right relationship the Coalition stated,

“This Administration creates a dangerous and chaotic situation by closing a legal port of entry then lays in wait to tear gas innocent people. Migration is a right, closing borders on people trying to seek asylum not only goes against international and domestic law, but it is deeply immoral.”

More than 8,000 migrants from Central America hoping to seek asylum are at the border in Tijuana, many having traveled on foot for months. But Customs and Border Patrol Agents at the San Ysidro port of entry process less than 100 claims daily. People are being detained in what used to be a performance amphitheater under squalid conditions.

The Coalition hopes the Sanctuary Caravan will be a long-term effort with a physical presence on both sides of the border. The project includes a clinic on the Mexico side helping people prepare to present themselves to CBP; U.S. citizens who will accompany those crossing the border to witness and wait for them to be released; and volunteer networks to help them connect with organizations and resources that will continue to offer safety and support. This is righteous anger in action.

This coming Friday afternoon after the 4pm Taize service, I hope you will join me and members of our Social Action Team and La Luz to form a peaceful march of solidarity with our migrant brothers and sisters. We will process to the square where we will form a silent circle holding candles to remind us that righteous anger doesn't have to be loud to send a message.

Friends, let us not be lulled into complacency by piped in holiday music and shiny catalogues proclaiming that filling the voids in our lives with more stuff will make us more complete.

This year Advent, embrace your inner John the Baptist.

It is within the bounds of reason for people of faith to rage against injustice that denies asylum seekers the legal right to file for protection and safe passage into a nation that prides itself on wealth and generosity.

Anger that causes us to turn inward or lash out at innocent bystanders is not productive, and not what I am advocating here today. But anger that is rooted in the practices of non-violence and the pursuit of justice not only has a place in the Christmas story, it is the Christmas story. Amen