

Advent II - LOVE



Light the second Advent candle, the candle representing LOVE.

Read Matthew 3:1-6

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.’”

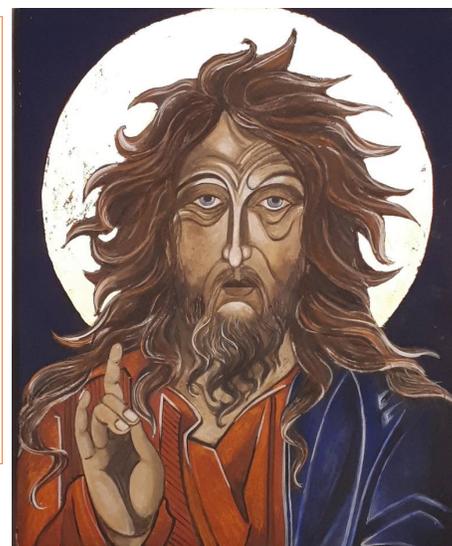
Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John the Baptist

John the Baptist is an important person in the season of Advent because he prepared the way for Jesus. He is also an interesting character. What does the text tell us about him?

Where did he live?
What did he wear?
What was he eating?
What was he doing?

Compare the images of John the Baptist on these pages. What do you notice about the artists' depiction of John? Notice how race plays into our images of historical figures. Which is your favorite? Why?



John the Baptist by Lynda Miller Baker

What did John Eat?

Because we are working on a pollinator garden and thinking a lot about insects and plants, I think it is interesting to take a closer look at the “locust” in this text. People have often assumed that John the Baptist was eating an



insect called a locust, which looks much like a grasshopper.

But, there is another possibility. There is a tree in the Middle East that the Bedouins (a nomadic Arab tribe that historically inhabited the desert) call a locust tree. It is also known as the Carob tree. These trees produce a long bean pod containing carob seeds. Carob tastes a lot like chocolate but is much healthier. While you cannot feed chocolate to dogs, carob is good for them. So, it is possible that John the Baptist was living in the wilderness eating honey and something like chocolate. Sounds a lot less miserable, doesn't it?!

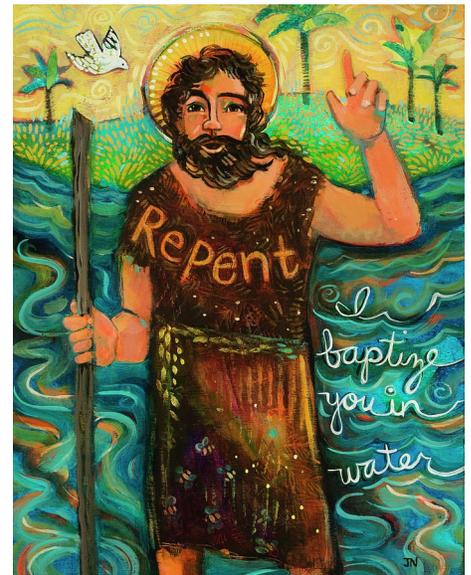
There are a lot of misunderstandings like this in our reading of Scripture. Some are not too important, like whether or not John ate a bug or chocolate, but others change our understanding of the text. This is why studying and seeking to understand the original meaning of the text is so important. Otherwise, we can use Scripture to hurt certain groups of people such as women or the LGBTQ community.

Repent & Baptize

As you remember, John was in the wilderness baptizing and calling people to repent.

Definition: to repent means to turn around or go the other way. It means to change your behavior by doing the opposite thing.

So, if you sat silent while a friend told a racist joke, to repent would be to confront your friend and explain why you think the joke was hurtful and inappropriate. If you cheated on a test, to repent would be to confess and not cheat again.



St. John the Baptist Tapestry by Jen Norton

If you attended a party without your parents knowledge and engaged in behavior they would not approve, to repent would be to talk to your parents and make a different decision next time.

Can your family come up with some other examples of what it would mean to repent?



The preaching of John the Baptist by Domenico Ghirlandaio

Repentance— Presbyterian Theology 101



St. John the Baptist Preaching in the Wilderness by Anton Raphael Mengs

I defined the word “repent” because “repentance” tends to be a loaded word. It is a churchy word that is often misused inside and outside the church. It means to repent or show remorse or regret and change one’s behavior. When you hear the word “repentance” what do you think? Have you heard it used in some church circles in relation to being saved?

There are some Christian traditions that stress the connection between being saved and repentance. It is also popular in traditions in which a person must “accept Christ as their Lord and Savior” or “invite Jesus into your heart.” These traditions stress the work of the individual. In other words, you are responsible for choosing Jesus and God. You are supposed to repent, which often means feel really bad about who you are and what you have done, and then you choose to be a Christian. In choosing to be a Christian, you are choosing to live a good life, which is often defined by the church and includes a lot of “do-nots.”

In the Presbyterian tradition, our theology flips that understanding around. We do not believe it is our work, but God’s work. God comes to us. We receive God’s love and grace with gratitude. In gratitude, we repent because we want to live lives worthy of God’s love. We want to live good and faithful lives that reflect the love we have found in God.

Which understanding of repentance makes the most sense to you? Which do you like better? Which do you think offers the most freedom to people?

Baptism

Through baptism and repentance, John was inviting people to prepare for the one who would come after him—Jesus. (You may remember that it is John that baptizes Jesus, many years later.) Were you baptized? If so, do you remember it? If not, ask your parents to tell you the story. Where were you baptized? Who baptized you? Who was with you? What does it mean to you and to your parents that you were baptized?

For Presbyterians, baptism is a sign of God’s love and claim on our lives. Many Presbyterians are baptized as infants. This reminds us that God claims us as God’s beloved child before we can know God or name God. Again, God is the one who acts, not us. Baptism is also a welcoming into the church community. At baptism, a congregation promises to teach a child the faith and to know God. They also promise to love the child and support it’s parents.



Unknown artist. The Baptism of Christ. 20th Century. Chinese.



How has First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto supported you and your family? How have they sought to teach you the Christian faith?

What does it mean to you that God loved you and claimed you as a beloved child before you could know or understand the concept of God?

John Baptizing Christ in the Jordan© David Zelenka

Pollinator Garden Connection

In the next month or so, you all will work for a few hours pulling out the roots of shrubs in order to make space on the church property for a pollinator garden. I contend this is an act of love. How?

Last week we reflected on hope. This week, we are considering about what it means to love.

We are in the middle of the holiday season in which we spend a lot of time getting ready and preparing.

In what ways did you all (or your mom and dad) prepare for Thanksgiving?

How will you prepare for Christmas?

How is preparing for these two holidays an act of love?

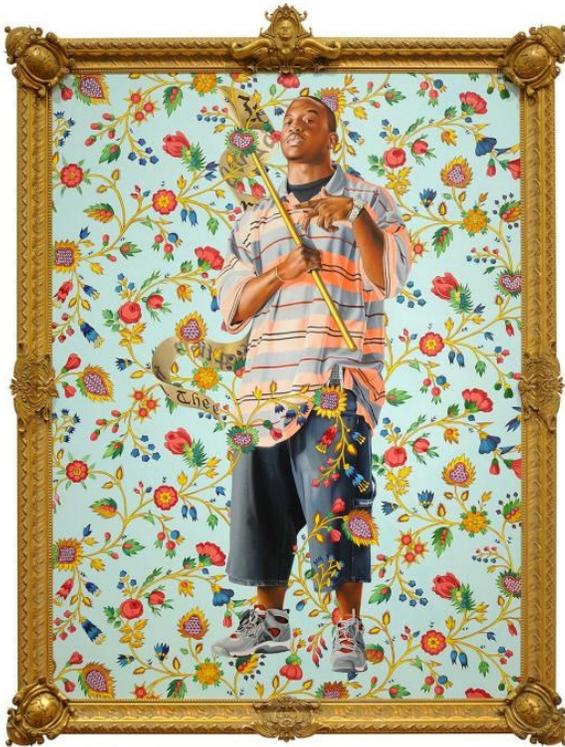
How is making room for something an act of love?

Advent Week II Project

Think of a way your family can prepare for Christmas this year. It might be a tradition you want to continue or something new you want to try. Maybe you want to make a special family recipe and share it with others. Maybe you want to make a card for a grandparent or relatives you will not see this Christmas. Maybe you want to donate some items to those in need – food, clothing, toys, etc. Maybe you want to make the carob dog treats for a neighbor's dog. See the recipe on the last page. Maybe you want to thank someone at the church who has been special to you and supported you or helped teach you about your faith.

As a family, think of how you will show love to one another and to others? In doing this, we are making room for God in our hearts. When we love, we make more and more room for love. As I so often tell my daughter, love is not a limited thing. While she is much younger than you all, I think we all need reminded of this fact. I love her, our family and pets, my friends, and many others. I even have room for loving people I have not yet met. As I do so, love only grows. We never run out of love. This is because love is from God. It is the way God interacts with us. God loves us and, therefore, we have an endless supply of love to give. We even have enough love to give to the monarch butterfly and other amazing creatures who share this planet home with us! The more we love, the more we have to give, and the more we come to know the God that loves us.

If you are willing, share with Sally or Jim what your family decided to do to prepare for Christmas this year—how you decided to make your love grow.



St. John the Baptist II
Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University

“Kehinde Wiley’s larger-than-life paintings incorporate a range of art historical and urban vernacular styles, positioning young African American men dressed in contemporary, casual fashions in the same poses as figures from Old Master paintings. The pose of the man here comes directly from a c. 1617 painting Saint John the Baptist by the Flemish artist Jacob Jordaens. Placing his subjects in powerful and often sensual poses, Wiley transforms expectations of masculinity, sexuality and black identity. By referencing Old Master imagery, Wiley also inserts black figures into the Western art historical canon from which they traditionally have been excluded.”

Kehinde Wiley is the official portraitist of former President Barack Obama.

Resources:

The Carob Tree: <https://canopy.org/blog/tree-spotlight-carob-tree/>

Carob Dog Biscuits: <https://theconsiderablecookie.com/carob-dog-treats/>

For more on Kehinde Wiley: <https://artandtheology.org/2016/08/31/christian-themed-portraits-by-kehinde-wiley/>

CAROB DOG BISCUITS

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups whole grain flour
- 1/2 cup carob powder
- 3/4 ripe banana (or omit the banana & use 2 eggs instead of one)
- 1 egg
- 3/4 cup canned pumpkin
- 1/3 cup of natural peanut butter

INSTRUCTIONS

Pre heat oven to 350 degrees.

Mix together egg, banana, pumpkin, and peanut butter in a separate bowl until combined. In a separate bowl, combine flour and carob powder. Mix dry ingredient in with wet ingredients until thoroughly combined. Mixture will be thick and dough like. Flour a counter surface and roll out dough. Use cookie cutters of your choice and place on cookie sheet lined with parchment paper. Bake 25-30 minutes. Cool completely before serving.

