

December 5, 2010 the Reverend Dr. Catharine Randall Christ Church

John the Baptist, Advent 1

Wildness frightens us; we want to domesticate it . It is odd and unpredictable, not normal. What does wildness want of us?

Here we have John the Baptist, the Wild Man of the Jordan, wildness incarnate, bursting out on the scene of our spiritual horizon. He is the wild man of Advent. *Advenire*: the Latin means “coming towards”, and he strides towards us, wearing the skins of wild animals, he’s a “raw foodie” cramming honey and locusts into his stomach, his arms flailing and gesticulating, strange words pouring out of his mouth about threshing floors and winnowing forks and fires blazing and roots being pulled up. What are we to make of him? Let’s just run away!

But no; Scripture tells us that those in the surrounding countryside *went out to* him; they poured like a flood into the desert to see this wild man and to be baptized by him. Rather than run away, they were drawn to him, just as, chilled to the bone by frost and sleet, we draw near to any fire that blazes brightly. Wildness has its own attractions.

In the 18th century, there was a famous case much studied by anthropologists and scientists in France. The case was that of the “Wild Boy of Aveyron.” One day, while tilling his field near the edge of a forest, a peasant happened to spy a wild child lurking like some demon or animal at the edge of the wood,

stuffing himself with raw turnips that fell from the plow. The farmer captured the filthy boy and brought him to his house. The boy couldn't speak, but rolled his eyes and used his body like a small monkey to communicate. It was conjectured that he had been raised by wolves. He was brought to the king's court as a source of amusement and wonder. Many philosophers worked with him; they tried to teach him the alphabet, how to use the facilities, how to eat with a knife and fork. He would not keep his clothes on, tore his shoes off, and tried to run away any chance he could. Finally, in despair he gave up, became fat and sullen, was kept in chains, never learned to speak, and died young, yet another casualty of civilization.

We want to tame wildness, to tamp it down. But there is a message for us in wildness. We need to hear it. At the threshold of Advent stands John the Baptist, our own wild man. Like the Wild Boy of Aveyron, he has his own knowledge that the world cannot comprehend or contain.

Listen to him! This is what he says: "I do not care for 'civilization and its discontents'. I do not heed peer pressure and conformity and consumerism. I speak truth, raw and unadorned. I erupt into your lives and unsettle them, because that is how the Holy Spirit will come. He will baptize you with fire in another season, the time of Pentecost, and all that is warped and distorted and fearful in you will be ripped out by the root and thrown into that fire. And you will burn brightly with a love and a fierce knowledge of God, because all that is unnecessary and impure within you will be GONE!"

John the Baptist is a fire-starter. He's like the fires that the National Park Service sets intentionally to remove dead wood and to make a clearing for new growth. He's the "Big Burn." And in our hearts, that

new growth will come, slowly, inexorably, tenaciously. And we shall begin to live our lives with a form of wildness, relentless and clear and focused and true, that the world cannot understand.

Burn brightly. Let the flames of passion crackle high and reach to the sky! Our Gospel is not a timid text. It is not a lullaby for the shy and retiring. In this time of Advent, God comes toward us, a torch born high in John the Baptist's hand to light the way before Him, setting sparks and igniting brushfires as He comes.

Don't put out the fire. Scripture tells us that the ONLY sin that will not be forgiven is the sin against the Holy Spirit. Burn, baby, burn. Set our hearts on fire.

"In wildness is our salvation" (Thoreau)