

Stories of John the Baptist somehow bring out the bad actor in most preachers. There's something about the disheveled, misunderstood, cousin of Jesus, who ate locusts and wild honey that we preachers seem to like to trip out on. We love to put on a pair of scuffed up Birkenstocks, wrap ourselves in a burlap bag tied with a remnant of yellow nylon rope (like there was nylon then), find some bent up stick that will do for a staff and take on the role of the baptizer, yelling all the great lines from scripture at an unsuspecting gaggle of Sunday morning worshippers.

I remember one such Advent Sunday in Summerland when the usual senior Sunday crowd showed up looking a little peaked and tired because they'd spent the day before raising nearly \$2500 at the annual Christmas craft and bake sale. The minister, dressed in the suitable John the Baptist attire began the sermon with his back to this bedraggled crowd...turned around very slowly and yelled – I'm not kidding – he yelled "you brood of vipers, how can you speak good, when you are evil." No kidding. This largely retired crowd of hardworking church folk just had a huge success the day before, and at church on Sunday, the minister tells them they're evil. No no no...he doesn't tell them...he yells at them.

And I've had my own kick at that cat. I remember the first year I was Trinity in Vernon. We had decided that we would build a huge people sized model of the bible and through the season of Advent, characters from the story would step out of the bible, and give a dramatic monologue about their respective roles. True to the form I just described, dressed in similar burlap and Birkenstocks, I became John the Baptist. But not only did I yell at them, I had the nerve to invite the unsuspecting crowd to the table of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist presided over communion. Now how weird is that??

This morning I'm not pulling any such antics. Burlap makes me itch. I don't have the Birkenstocks any longer, and I'm not going to yell at you. I'm just puzzling over the Sunday in Advent on which we mark "peace" on the Advent wreath, thinking about what it means to prepare the way of the Lord, to repent of sins, what to do with power, and what does it mean to be baptized in the Spirit. My questions all come from the world around me, that touches me every time I turn on the TV or flip open my laptop.

First, let me share with you what I read on my facebook page this week from my colleague Sandra Severs who is deputy director at the Mission of First United Church in the downtown eastside.

“We have finally hit the regulatory wall. We have been forced by the City of Vancouver to comply with the occupant load of 240 people in our building - a number that includes staff. That means for the first time in four winters we will be forced to exclude people from our building - even if they have nowhere else to go. The whole situation just sucks.

“Some people will wonder about why we would put people at risk by having in excess of 240 people in our building. Let me say that we have not put anyone at risk. For the past three winters we have exceeded this number with the full knowledge and consent of the City and Province. For some reason, there is concern being expressed this winter. We have no investment in having huge numbers in our building. We just want to make sure people have a place to go. And they don't at the moment.

“Just arrived at work....The night shift is going off and looking like they have been in a battle. They turned over thirty people away last night, eleven of them were our regulars. Everyone's mood is pretty somber. I understand the issue of occupant load but what kind of city turns people out on the street in freezing weather and doesn't provide an alternative?”

On this Advent Sunday, when we remember Christ's peace, what do we do with power, and what does it mean to repent of sins?

My friend Arthur is a volunteer for Aids Vancouver. He spent Thursday, World Aids Day, trying to help locally in whatever way possible in light of the continuing staggering global statistics:

At the end of 2010 an estimated:

- 34 million [31.6 million – 35.2 million] people globally living with HIV
- 2.7 million [2.4 million – 2.9 million] new HIV infections in 2010
- 1.8 million [1.6 million – 1.9 million] people died of AIDS-related illnesses in 2010

The United Nations is supporting a new three year initiative entitled getting to zero by 2015: – Zero AIDS Related Deaths, Zero New Infections and Zero Discrimination. And Aids Vancouver is working on the same initiative.

In Vancouver the number of cases of HIV/Aids continues to increase...although with easier access to testing, greater treatments, people are living longer and living healthier.

On this Advent Sunday, when we remember Christ's peace, what does it mean to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight? I'm not kidding. Sometimes I wonder if our society, our culture only the religious right's response to HIV/AIDS epidemic – make every one's path straight. Not particularly helpful.

Finally I'm thinking about our conversation at Waves this week, where we talked about Gloria Taylor, a 63 year old woman from Westbank, living with Lou Gehrig's disease who has taken her fight to strike down Canada's law against assisted suicide to the BC Supreme Court. In her sworn affidavit she said: What I want is to be able to die in a manner that is consistent with the way I lived my life," Ms. Taylor said "I want to exercise control and die with dignity and with my sense of self and personal integrity intact."

We had a lively conversation, I expressed my opinion, and still I wonder on this Advent Sunday, when we remember Christ's peace, and his words "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly," I wonder what it means to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

The downtown Eastside, the world's aids epidemic, the right to die with dignity; wow, that's a heavy week for the advent of the prince of peace. In one hand, I hold out to you the promise that peace is as close to us as our connection to this moment. In one hand I hold out the belief that there is no justice until the world lives in justice, there is no healing until the world is healed, there is no peace until the world lives in peace.

My friend Jim Strathdee wrote a great Advent song many years ago. Waiting for the Kingdom of God. There is a line from the song that I think of every time I hold in my hands these two seemingly opposing notions. "What we do while we wait, depends on what we're waiting for."

It seems to me that we do both. We hold in one hand, and seek in our spiritual practice to find the peace that lives uniquely in our own bodies, as we participate in a season that makes us a little bit crazy. And we do what we can do to bring peace, with justice – to be the political hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world. One without the other, will not do. Amen.