

Before we get started this morning, I figure I should probably take a second to introduce myself to those of you who don't know me. I am Pastor Jenn's baby sister, Tina. I currently serve at Trinity Lutheran Church in Newport News, Virginia, and it is my immense joy and honor to be here with all of you this morning to finally give Jennifer the ordination celebration she deserves. I have to say of all the things that the Covid pandemic robbed us of, not being able to be physically present for Jenn's ordination is pretty near the top of the list for me, so to get to do this for and with her, is extremely special, so thank you all for having our family here this morning. Jennifer is the person who always makes sure that everyone else gets celebrated but rarely gives herself those moments, so this is a celebration a long time coming.

As some of you may know, there's a pretty decent age gap between the three of us. Jennifer is fifteen years older than me and then there is six years between Kristin and I, so we've all always kind of had our own segments of time, which also means that I don't have a ton of actual memories of all of us living in our house together, which makes the ones that I do have all the more sacred. Now, the way that our house is, the three of our rooms are kind of in an L shape, with mine as the short end, Jenn at the corner, and then Kristin above hers. This means that Jenn shared a wall with

both of us, which when I was little was very, very important to me. When I was growing up I slept with my bed along my shared wall with Jenn and her bed was against that same wall. Whenever she was home, and especially if I had a hard time sleeping, I would always give a little knock on the wall, and she would respond. It wasn't a hey, can I come crawl in bed with you kind of thing, it was simply a hey, you're home, you're right there kind of thing that always made me feel safe and assured that I could go to sleep because Jenn was just on the other side of the wall. And we all need those kinds of moments, right? Those reminders and assurances of, hey, I'm here, I didn't go anywhere, I've always been right here. Now, Jennifer wasn't wearing camel hair when she knocked on my wall and cakes are much more her jam compared to locusts and honey, *but* that steady reminder she gave me? It's a little bit of what John the Baptist rolls in doing this morning, but with less, hey, I've missed you and more, get your act together, you brood of vipers!

This is really when we start to feel like it's Advent, right? The first week never quite *hits* like you expect it to when it comes to the lectionary. You're expecting Advent and instead you get the end of the world, so it's kind of nice to have John the Baptist on the scene, but let's be real, John wasn't exactly thinking his job was to be the guy that *excited* everyone. While he did kind of serve as Jesus' hype man, he was also a really big gut

check, Jiminy Cricket sort of figure for the people he has come to preach to.

So the reality is, this has always been what Advent is, the take a look in the mirror reminder that the world is about to change and you have to ask yourself if you've kept awake, if you're ready for that change to happen.

The scene that John the Baptist emerges onto is not one that is super pleasant. The Roman occupation of ancient Israel was well and truly entrenched. The Jewish leaders were at best figureheads and at worst puppets for the occupying government. Rome were not benevolent leaders, they kept control and order through a steady combination of oppressive taxation and the threat of violence, particularly to anyone who opposed their governing order. The gap between wealthy and poor was stark, and the area where John emerges, where he has grown up is one that is solidly agrarian in nature. These are farmers and fishermen and people who would have felt the Roman pinch acutely. So, when John makes his appearance with a word that is fiery and unabashedly unafraid to call out reality, there had to be a tinge of...well, it is about time, coupled with, oh Lord, this could get us in trouble and we have enough trouble.

You have to imagine as those first crowds gathered on the banks of the Jordan and heard John lambast the Pharisees and Sadducees for their ambivalence and sometimes straight up accommodation of the Roman

authorities, there had to be a bit of yeah, finally, someone needs to tell these people off. You also have to imagine there is a little bit of the typical small town grapevine going, umm, isn't this Zechariah's kid? Like Zechariah the priest? He's saying some pretty intense things for a clergy kid... You know there is someone in that crowd that thinks John needs to recognize the situation and know his place, because they've known him since he was a baby and well, he might be grown up, but they are still his elders. And then you know there are the people who are like is no one concerned he just came out of the wilderness? No one thinks it's weird he's dressed like that? Are we really giving credence to the guy yelling by the river? It's a very complex set of emotions and circumstances going on all of which lead to one conclusion: every single person had a reason *not* to listen to John. Everyone could point to why they should write him off, he's a lunatic, he doesn't know what he's talking about, he's just the kid who grew up here, he's been gone forever he doesn't know this community anymore, he's talking about *those* people, but not us.

And this is where Advent creeps up and gets us, because we want it all to be happy and warm and fuzzy, because we basically feel like Advent is synonymous with Christmas and so this whole the world is going to end, fire and brimstone, you brood of vipers, you must repent talk is for someone

else, right? I mean, yes we want to hear from John because John is part of the season, but his message? Well, that's for another time, another place, another people, certainly not for us. But the gospel just loves to give comfort and conscience at the same time, doesn't it. John the Baptist is the knock on the wall to all of us, reminding us that we need to be attuned to what the message of this season is saying to us, reminding us that God always there, always has been, and is always going to be about the business of calling us to repentance and baptismal living. John is the voice crying in the wilderness and the knock on the wall saying God is coming and God has always been here, so keep awake, be ready, and remember what God has called you to from the very beginning.

But we aren't always interested in an Advent of accountability. Maybe for others, but certainly not for us, yet John's message came for all. Yes, sure he had some pointed things to say to the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but *everyone* was called to repentance, no one was immune from the reminder that they had fallen away from walking with God and seeking to be about loving others, seeking justice, and giving grace and mercy. John's message came for fishermen and priest alike, farmer and tax collector. It looked everyone in the eye and dared to ask, have you been asleep this whole time?

One of the things our family jokes about and has always kind of teased Jenn about is being each of our Jiminy Cricket. One of the first times we went to Disney, we took a series of pictures of her in front of a Pinocchio mural and those pictures are still framed and up at my mom's house. A reminder that Jenn will be the comforting knock on your wall and the nudge that says, umm, you probably shouldn't do that. And in so many ways, that is the tension of Advent, that is the tension of John the Baptist.

There can be no doubt that there is comfort in this season. Jesus is coming and he is coming for us with all of our flaws, foibles, and foolishness. There is not a single thing we can do to stop God from sending Jesus into this world to shine a light into every darkness. Our own sense of our worthiness is irrelevant in the face of a God who loves us so much that there is nothing we can do to stop it. And that was part of what John wanted to remind people of, return to the Lord who loves you so much, return to the Lord who is sending the Messiah to you in all of your human messiness, return to the Lord who is going to walk in your footsteps and show you a greater way. Jesus is coming and thank God for that, because now more than ever we need that message of hope and love and peace and joy. In a world gone mad, we need to cling to the coming of Christ and rejoice that no matter how imperfect we and the world are, God will redeem it and us.

But there is also an accounting of our hearts that is necessary at this time of year. This little baby that is coming into the world, this man whom John prepared the way for, he is coming to call the world to radical hospitality, love without question, and grace beyond measure. He is coming to call God's people to return to a humbler, gentler, more just way of living, and when we force ourselves to look in the mirror, we have to confront the fact that we far too often fall short of that mark, and not just because we're human and make mistakes but because we actively choose to. We choose to hate, to judge, to ignore, to exclude, and that is the attitude which John the Baptist would call viperity. So we must also prepare our hearts to a radical changing, a turning of us upside down, so that we might walk through this world not only as children of God, but as God's hands and feet.

People of God, live into the tension. Feel the hope and the comfort and anticipate the joy, but dare to ask yourself how you can love better, how you can be more graceful, how you can live into your baptismal calling. Jesus is going to get here no matter what, there's nothing we can do to stop that, but we can change the hearts we have to receive him. Will they be awake and ready, or find another reason why this isn't a message for us. People of God dare to come to the wilderness and wonder. Dare to listen for where God is seeking to knock on your wall with a reminder...**AMEN!!!**