

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2017
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 40:1-11
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a
Mark 1:1-8

I rise today in praise of oddballs and weirdos and other eccentrics.

John the Baptizer is my inspiration, of course. I'll come back to him in a moment. But first I'll remind you of one or two others.

This time of year, I think of the Muppets. There's a scene near the end of *A Muppet Family Christmas* when Fozzie's mom looks at all of the Muppets gathered in her farmhouse in the country and pronounces, "They're weirdos, Fozzie." He says, "Yeah?" And then she concedes, "But they're nice weirdos." And Fozzie chuckles quietly, saying, "Yeah."

Gonzo, of course, is the most apt for today (if only because he's a bluish-purple ... perfect colors for Advent). If memory serves, in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, the oddball Rizzo the Rat turns to Gonzo at one point and says to him, "You're so weird." Gonzo simply replies, "Thanks."

Of course, they're fictional characters. We're not so wonderfully wacky, you and I. But there are those – some here among us, perhaps – who aspire to be eccentric. I'm thinking of a well-known poem by Jenny Joseph called "Warning." If it doesn't yet sound familiar, I think it will.

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

Not so very weird, compared with Gonzo or the other Muppets. But the poem has inspired some women – some here among us, perhaps – to be part of the “Red Hat Society,” a society of women who aim to practice being eccentric. I hope I’m not “man-splaining” too much here, but these mismatched outfits of red and purple aim to make a statement about being women and having fun as they age.

Compared with them, John the Baptizer is a wilder eccentric yet. Instead of purple shirts and red hats, he shows up “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist,” eating “locusts and wild honey.” But still, after a fashion, he is a man’s version of the Red Hat Society. Not as fun-loving, to be sure, but he’s crunch and groovy. And strange, weird, odd, eccentric.

And none of this is beside the point. It is precisely the point.

Eccentric is an interesting word when you break it down. *Ec-centric*, from *ec*, meaning “out,” and *centric*, meaning “center.” To be eccentric is literally to be out of the center, off-center, which is precisely what we know about John the Baptizer. He is off-center in terms of his dress and his diet, and especially he is off-center in terms of his geography and his message.

If we could learn nothing more from John than this, I suppose, we’d have learned a lot.

I’m not actually advocating being weird, like Gonzo, merely for the sake of being weird, but I am suggesting there’s value in aiming to be eccentric for the sake of eccentricity. Because, you see, there’s always a center somewhere that imagines itself more important, more central, than it really is. But it’s probably somebody else’s center, not ours. And certainly not God’s.

And the example of John tells us that we would do well to avoid getting sucked into somebody else’s center, lest we lose our own. Better to be eccentric, off-center, following the example of someone like John the Baptizer if need be. (Wear a red hat, if it helps.)

This time of year, of course, the world spins around all the hype of Christmas. The bright lights. The hustle and bustle of shopping. The hurrying and scurrying and worrying.

I used to resent it more than I do nowadays. I find I don’t really mind it all as I once did, but I don’t treasure it either. What I most appreciate these days is how we, here in the church, are a bit eccentric. I don’t lament the contrast between what we do here and what goes on around us in the world at large; in fact, I rather enjoy it. It helps me appreciate something of our calling: here, at least for a few minutes on a Sunday morning in December, it’s not Christmas, not yet anyhow; it’s Advent – a quiet season, a dark season, a season for eccentrics and eccentricities.

And it's not just the clothes he wears that sets John apart. It's where he wears them. He's "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." He places himself a long way from the center. Jerusalem was the center of things, the city where the people that mattered were. The Temple was in the city, where the priests did their thing. It was the place where forgiveness and righteousness were expected. Jerusalem was where the problems of the world were to be resolved.

But John isn't there. He's standing off-center, knee deep in the river Jordan. It was a hard day's journey (at least) from the center of *anything*. And there, outside anyone else's center, John was a voice saying that forgiveness was available to any who wanted it. In other words, the good news of Jesus Christ begins with new life for anyone and everyone.

And that is still the beginning of the good news for us, for you and me. It still hardly matters what we've done up to this point in time with our lives and it matters even less who we are or where we are. John shows us that much.

And he also shows us, perhaps, that we might do the same here where we live – which is, as most people probably think of it, pretty much the middle of nowhere.

There are so many problems in our world: civil rights; immigration; sexual harassment and abuse; international conflicts; terrorism; environmental exploitation; gun violence; political toxicity. And closer to home, perhaps: illness; death; discord; financial hardships; isolation. There's a lot wrong, near and far, everywhere we turn.

It's depressing. It's discouraging. It's dismaying. But John reminds us not to wait on others – least of all those in charge – to begin fixing what's wrong. Isaiah is his exemplar:

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly ...*

Even here, in the middle of nowhere, so far removed from any center of power – 133 miles from Salem, 2,700 miles from Washington, D.C., 5,400 miles from Geneva, and 7,000 miles from Jerusalem ... even here, at the center of where we are, we are encouraged to initiate a new beginning for those around us. On Facebook, Jeannette Beeger posted this quote recently:

Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.

And so I rise today in praise of oddballs and weirdos and other eccentrics. And I rise today to invite us to follow their examples ... not merely to be weird for the sake of being weird, but to be eccentric enough to celebrate this season of longing for a better world, and eccentric enough to believe that what we do here, even here in the middle of nowhere, matters.