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Advent II

John the Baptizer is one straaaange dude. I mean, he wears camel hides, he eats wild honey and bugs, and now he's raving at *all* the people of the Judean countryside and *all* the people of Jerusalem to be baptized and to repent for the forgiveness of their sins. *And people took him very seriously!*

Most interpreters write that John was a necessary character in the story of Jesus Christ. If the Son of God simply appeared without any preparation, who could identify him? Who could make any sense of what he did?

And so God sent this strange prophet, John, to prepare the way of the Lord.

But he really was strange.

At the ordination of Nurya Parish yesterday in Grand Rapids, Father Mike Fedawa preached about the strangeness of John -- and about the strangeness of priests. He was warning Nurya that she was about to enter a really strange group. Men and women who feel called by God. Oh, please. Men and women who will visit dying parishioners. Men and women who tell the rest of us to feed the homeless and the hungry. It is really a very strange vocation, and to be quite honest, I can't imagine doing anything else.

Because like John, we preachers are given the opportunity to make people uncomfortable! Imagine that! I am actually given financial compensation to make people squirm! When I tell you that the Gospel calls us to seek the face of Jesus in the homeless man, isn't that a bit strange? When I tell you that the Gospel imperative is to love our enemy -- isn't that strange? Doesn't it make you a little uncomfortable?

Well, it should. Because you're strange, too.

Week after week you turn down dozens of ways to spend Sunday morning and you come here to praise God, to pray, to give me your undivided attention -- well, usually, anyway -- and you let me tell you: Give thanks then go out these doors and be Jesus in a broken world!

Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd? A bit strange?

And wasn't that what Strange John was doing? Wasn't he telling the people of Judea and Jerusalem that they needed to get baptized and start over? That they needed to make a *personal response*?

Now trust me: I am not comparing myself to St. John. But honestly, isn't John's message the one we hear week after week, month after month through the church year? Repent, start over, and pay attention: Christ is here. Christ is among you. Christ is alive. Christ is in the church, Christ is in the homeless shelter, Christ is at Wal-Mart and The Brass and the soup kitchen. *The Kingdom of God is NOW.*

Strange business.

And when we respond, when we commit ourselves to be disciples, we're all a bit strange, too. Not strange in the sense of simply unusual, not strange in the sense that we're alien, but strange in the sense of the holy.

When we take on this strange faith called Christianity we are entering holy territory. Just like Moses and the burning bush, we need to remove our shoes and walk on holy ground. Because this ground is holy. This Altar is holy. Jesus Christ was holy, our Patron Saint was holy, Martin Luther King, Jr., was holy, Gandhi was holy, the Buddha was holy... And each one of you, every one of us... is holy.

And I will freely admit that sometimes I don't act very holy.

But every time I catch myself acting in an un-holy way I must repent: I must be born again, over and over; I must be re-baptized in the living water that is God; I must repent and make an amendment to my life and I must know, I must acknowledge, I must rejoice in this one simple fact: God loves me.

I am holy.

And I am strange.

Laugh if you must. Because you're strange, too.

John represents a reversal of all earthly values; he stands outside the crowd yet he beckons them toward the water. He offers them a chance to cleanse themselves of all sin, a chance to be forgiven, a chance to enter into a new way of life that is without the old baggage -- a chance to be one with Jesus.

Jesus, the one whose coming John announces, will be a different sort of leader. He will be so superior that John isn't worthy even to untie his sandal. The one who is coming is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit. He will plunge us all into the waters of God, the life of God, *personally*.

The Son of God is about to appear. We can barely imagine it. We can't contain it. It is too wonderful, too mysterious, simply *too big* for us to comprehend. And so Strange John prepares the way.

Prophets have prepared the way for generations. The Old Testament people of Judah believed that a military defeat was a sign of God's anger. Perhaps it was. The exile in Babylon was God's punishment on a sinful people. Who knew?!?

And they wept and they felt that God had left them for good.

But God doesn't do that. God doesn't act like a spurned lover, never to return. God is always with us. Even when we don't think so.

In the year 539 BC, Cyrus, the ruler of Persia, conquered Babylon. In the following year Cyrus allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and Judah, and Isaiah wrote these words.

*Comfort, O comfort my people, Nahamu, nahamu ami, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term. Her warfare is ended. Her penalty is paid.*

And now we're coming to the end of time: God is about to come to earth. Jesus will be his name. Emmanu-el. And Strange John is preparing us for this climatic act of God by inviting us into the water, inviting us to cleanse ourselves from sin and all the baggage you and I carry around with us every day. John is asking us to empty ourselves so that we will be ready to take on new lives -- because our lives will be inspired by the gift of the Spirit.

Jesus baptizes us, anoints us, with the Holy Spirit in endless ways. We are strange people, we walk on holy ground. We anoint the sick, we feed the hungry, we visit the lonely, we cry for justice. At our best, we are the hands and heart of Christ. At our best, we see the face of Christ in every human being. At our best, we are humble and merciful and compassionate and forgiving and forgiven.

Very strange. Wonderfully strange.

I do love all you foolish and strange people.

So does God.

Amen.