



## “Celebrating Messiah: Root Deeply”

Second Sunday in Advent  
5:30 p.m., Saturday, December 3, 2016  
The Reverend John H. Brock  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

So, here's a bit of trivia you don't need to know: Remember how I mentioned that a few weeks ago I went back to a former congregation in Connecticut, where I served as a youth director? One of the things we did while I was there that involved the youth group (but was *not* the responsibility of the youth director) was that we, along with the rest of the congregation, put on the musical “Godspell.”

If you're familiar with that wonderful, you might remember that it is based on the Gospel of Matthew. It opens with the character of John the Baptist coming out and addressing, or perhaps better said, haranguing, the audience, encouraging them, first, to prepare the way of the Lord, and then, lays into them for their lack of faith, or their lazy faith, relying on their ancestry to bring them salvation, while they themselves do little to nothing in order to strengthen their faith, or even to *live* a life of faith.

John calls them out for the snakes that he sees them as, and describes to them, in rather graphic detail just what he believes the Lord God will do to those who so disdain their faith.

Guess who I got to play?

*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup>Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

It's a great part to play, not only because of that speech, but also due to the fact that, if you remember anything about John the Baptizer, you may well remember that he gets killed by Herod about half way through Matthew's gospel. That death is **not** depicted in the musical, but the human authors were well-aware of that fact, and so, after a bit, the actor who is portraying the character of John, morphs into the character of Judas. Which, theologically, is a good Lutheran understanding of grace, sin, and forgiveness; the roots of Christian faith.

So, what are the roots of **your** faith? Many of us probably have our faith roots in our parents. Most Christians in the Lutheran tradition, and the majority of Christians in general, at least here in the Western Culture, were more than likely baptized as an infant or child. While I have presided at baptisms for older youth and adults, those have not nearly numbered in the amount of infant and child baptisms I have been a part of. Last week, when we celebrated baptism with the Roy twins, we talked about roots, about how in baptism, parents make promises on behalf of their child, and then do their best to live up to those promises. When that child gets older, here at Trinity we say usually eighth grade, we ask those children to take on the responsibility of faith for themselves. To let their parents off the metaphorical hook, so to speak So in our Affirmation of Baptism classes, we talk about faith issues. We teach those young people about scripture. We talk about our sacraments, baptism and Eucharist, and what they mean. We talk about faith and spiritual nourishment and growth, how to continue those aspects throughout their lives. We talk about service, to others and to Gd. But mostly, we (the leaders) do their best to help give those young people a foundation, to give them roots, in faith so they can have a life-long faith.

But then we get this message from John, which I think is just as pertinent to us, today, as twenty-first century North Americans, as it was to the first century Palestinians. John is warning the people of his day to believe **for themselves**.

Too many of the folks John was encountering were simply going through the motions of faith, or relying on their ethnic heritage, in order to bring them salvation.

Several years ago, one of my favorite music duo did a song called **Casual Christian**. It took me caught me off guard at first, but the more I listened, the more I liked it. The song talks about not wanting to live a life with a casual faith.

*I don't want to be, I don't want to be a casual Christian.*

*I don't want to live, I don't want to live a lukewarm life.*

*Because I want to light up the night*

*With and everlasting light.*

*I don't want to live the casual Christian life.*

(DeGarmo & Key, 1985)

This would be someone not concerned with the roots of their faith.

Another phrase I've come across is similar: Cultural Christian. It means those who were raised, not necessarily in faith, or even attended worship or belonged to a church, but they grew up surrounded by the trappings of Christian faith, by those who claimed belief, regardless if they actually lived out that belief or not. These would be folks who say they believe in God, but rarely, if ever, go to worship. Folks who will raise up the Bible like a sword, but have little to no idea what scripture might genuinely say, beyond those few verses they may have learned to parrot. Folks who carry the cross as a weapon, to get across their ideology, rather than Christian doctrine and belief.

Does it matter if we're casual in our faith, or simply cultural? I think, yes, it does. As those who claim Christ as Messiah, as those who want to celebrate more than simply a little baby born in some backwater barn, then the roots of our faith need to run deep. **If,**

however, all we want are presents on December 25, along with feel-good warm and fuzzies; **if** all we're after is a reason to be indignant when someone says something about God or faith or life styles or that rubs us the wrong way or contradicts what we think about "life style", **then** we can keep our roots shallow, and wait for John's ax.

And did you catch the difference in baptism that John himself said? His baptism is for repentance. It's a baptism that cleanses us from sin, previous and current. The drawback to John's baptism is that, as soon as we come up out of the River Jordan, washed clean from our sin, we start right back up again, sinning. The one coming **after** John (meaning Jesus) for whom John *himself* is **not** worthy to even untie his sandal, that one will baptize with the Holy Spirit, and with fire. Jesus' baptism, the baptism into which we were baptized, washes us clean from our sin, past, present, and **future**. That is the baptism that will help our roots grow deep, that will give us the strength we need in this world of casual, cultural Christians.

Strengthen your faith. Feed your belief. Let your roots grow deep.

Amen.

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