

December 4, 2016

Prepared Water

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Matthew 3:1-12

Every year, Nathan's hot dog stand in Coney Island, New York holds a fourth-of-July hotdog eating contest, here would-be arch-gluttons compete against each other to see who can down the most foot long hotdogs in ten minutes. The grand prize is a coveted mustard yellow championship belt and no twenty-pounds of hotdogs. Now, if you think this is for the faint-hearted, in 2003 William "The Refrigerator" Perry, former NFL Defensive Lineman, competed and finished just four dogs. The contest has apparently been going since 1916, and when you open up the record books, you find what you'd expect: marked improvement. Slow, steady, and gradual increases year over year – as contestants try new things or remember what worked in previous years.

But something changed with the new Millennium. Tokeru Kobayashi was a spectator at the competition in 2000. Here's what he saw:

My honest opinion was that people were just eating as an extension of regular eating meals, and it looked like they were all like rushing to try eat more than they normally could. Just one more hot dog, just a little more. And I thought, Well, if you just look at it as a way of trying to put something in instead of, how much more can I eat than normal, then it really just takes a few questions and a little research on my part and experimentation to see how far I could actually go.

Kobayashi spent the next twelve months considering every physical, mental and strategic barrier that stood between him and victory. When 4 July, 2001 rolled around, Kobayashi stepped up to the plate, beating the previous record of 25 hot dogs, not just by one or two dogs – but by doubling it. That was the day competitive eating became a sport.

Christmas is the church's Fourth of July at Nathan's hotdog stand in Coney Island. It's the day we step up to the plate and demand darkness itself retreat. Christmas is the day that the church storms the gates of hell and declares that Satan will not win, and death will not have the last word.

But I ask you, if we can't win a hot dog eating contest without a year of preparation, what makes us think that we can compete in the arena of Christmas without the same?

Faith, like food, is often something that we take for granted - especially at this time of year. It becomes almost an impulse: the snow falls, the lights go up at the mall, and we find ourselves feeling a reflexive need to show up at church. And for our part, churches tend to encourage this. We depend on the boost in attendance every December to make budget at our year end. We print extra bulletins and put on extra coffee, because we know that we need you here.

But what if someone could take a look at the church the way Takeru Kobayashi looked at hotdogs? What if we change our frame of reference from being religious in this season as an extension of regular behaviour, and look at it as a way of trying to put something different into our lives instead of, how much more can I do than normal, then, to quote Kobayashi, it really

just takes a few questions and a little research on my part and experimentation to see how far we could actually go.

This is what Matthew's reading offers us this morning. The second Sunday of Advent is traditionally a Sunday for the church to focus on Peace, God and Sinners reconciled. And yet, here Matthew presents the furthest thing from peace. Here, we find John being antagonistic (to put it mildly), calling the most devoutly religious people he can find a Brood of vipers. Peace, it seems, is not part of the conversation today. Even now, an axe is lying at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. This is a story about anything but peace and civility, because ultimately, this is a story of self-examination. John represents a challenge to each of us, to look critically at ourselves, at our intentions and at our motivations, and ask whether there are any boundaries – artificial or otherwise – that are preventing us from becoming a fully Christmas people.

It's a call to look again, like the Pharisees who thought their perfect patronage, or theological pedigree was enough to set them in right relationship with God. John tells them that they don't get credit for simply showing up, and that God isn't interested in identity politics. Who you are matters less than whose you are, because John has seen behind the curtain and it is this apocalypse that leads him to the waters of repentance.

See, John knows something no one else in this story has figured out yet. From the moment that he first leapt within his mother's womb, John has been aware that God is doing something, even as everyone else missed it. But as the world rushed around him, declaring the dollar almighty, and power triumphant, John was watching the God who walked with Israel learn how to hold himself upright. John was watching the God who provided Manna from heaven learn to eat solid food. John was watching the God who parted the waters splash in a basin. He watched incarnation happen. And because of that, nothing would ever be the same for John again.

Because repentance is where our preparation begins. For some of us, that word evokes hard memories; times when Grace took a backseat to law – where repentance was preached as self-abasement, or self-denial. For some, repentance meant standing in front of an assembly and, teary-eyed, telling a story of how lost you were before Jesus found you. For others, repentance meant sitting in a confessional booth and receiving penance for sins committed. But none of those are the repentance that John preached. John's repentance was not absolution or contrition. It was reorientation. For the gospel writers, the only word they could think of to describe John's baptism was metanoia – literally, an about face. It was meant to convey the truism that wherever you are in life, the persistent prepared waters of baptism are a reminder that God allows UTurns. That life, like Advent, is a season of preparation.

This is part of the reason that in this church, we celebrate the Baptism of infants. The sacrament of Baptism isn't a saving ordinance any more than it is an act of trust. Baptism is a

lifelong commitment of walking with God, and the journey of your life that starts with baptism is a course that runs parallel to the church's journey toward Christmas. Our lives are lived as advent people, sandwiched between the now and the not yet.

So what are you preparing for this season? Where does your baptism lead you? I wonder if Kobayashi might have had his own critique of church.

My honest opinion was that people were just doing Christmas as an extension of regular behaviour, and it looked like they were all like rushing to try to do more than they normally could. Just one more event, just a little more church. And I thought, Well, if you just look at it as a way of trying to be someone instead of, how much more can I do than normal, then it really just takes a few questions and a little research on my part and experimentation to see how far I could actually go.

Baptism is our challenge to start training and see how far we can go. That's why this passage makes a particular sense in Advent. Baptism is a recognition that our whole life – mind, heart, soul and strength – has been reoriented; and because of Christmas, the world will never be the same again.