

**Advent II (A) December 3/4, 2016**  
**St. Timothy's Episcopal Church / Creve Coeur, Missouri**  
**The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, Priest Associate**  
**Matthew 3:1-12**

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My father was a lot like John the Baptist.  
Forceful. Loud. Dominating.

Like John the Baptist, he could be outrageous – not so much in dress -- but in opinions and expectations.

Dad was a NYC cop. He'd been on the beat in tough precincts in Brooklyn, he volunteered to transfer to a plain-clothes squad in Harlem, chasing guys over rooftops who were running the numbers racket (*before NY State decided to get in the business itself and launched a glitzy state lottery*).

If you watched Archie Bunker on *All in the Family* back in the '70s, you know my father. As my wife said of him – and as she says of me from time to time: “He was always certain; and sometimes right” in his opinions.

I tell you all this because when I told my parents back in 1959 that I was feeling a nudge to become an ordained minister – something quite off the charts in my family's story - my father's gruff comment was, “Well, all I can say is they don't make much money.”

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Today is a special day in my personal calendar: I was ordained 45 years ago on this Second Sunday of Advent, 1971. The approach of this anniversary has led me to reflect these last weeks on my vocation, on the paths and pitfalls that have shaped my ministry. I told Fr. Marvin I wanted to use my sermon to think deeply about my story, but not only my call. I hope my sharing stirs you to examine the call each of us carries by virtue of our baptism to live faithfully and fruitfully.

John the Baptist's forceful words to repent and live into the Kingdom of God, to produce fruit, is a forceful reminder that baptism is not privilege, but a grace-filled claim on each of us to find and live into our own vocation.

Baptismal vocation leads where it will – one a teacher, another a shopkeeper, a technician, a student, a full-time-stay-at-home parent. The deep longings of our heart are God’s longing, too, that we might find direction, meaning and fruitfulness in the living out of the precious life God gives.

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I was a freshman in high school in 1959, failing Spanish and lost in many ways. But the youth group of my local congregation was the strong rock God gave me to stand on, to find balance. Youth retreats, meetings and conferences fed some yearning deep inside me. Clergy from other congregations widened my sense of God’s loving embrace. Unknown to them, they blew gentle breaths of oxygen on the fledgling embers of my emerging sense of call. In many ways, I was lost. But God was finding me.

I was told Latin was a pre-requisite for admission to the pre-theological college I intended to apply to. When I told my guidance counselor, he laughed. How could a kid, failing Spanish, succeed at Latin instead? I didn’t know myself, but the next year with a good teacher named literally Mr. Whitebread, I mastered Latin.

Next was German (*I was in the Lutheran church in those days*), then Greek and Hebrew. Somehow, I did well enough to keep going. For eight years. College and seminary took me away from the familiar world of New York City and Long Island. God’s call takes us out of our comfort zones.

Rigorous academics and classmates from across the United States stretched what I thought I knew. My seminary education chipped away at the arrogance I carried as a New Yorker. Haughtiness didn’t play well in the St. Louis seminary I attended..

God’s call to each of us is to step out of the box we live in. God’s call, indeed, busts the very box we might think we have God in.

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Re-read today’s Gospel to hear how John the Baptist announces God’s box-busting plans. The Kingdom of God bursts out into that wilderness and takes the people by storm. “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand,”

John announces as he baptized them left and right. Not all are ready to heed the call, however. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” he admonishes the Pharisees and Sadducees who presumed they had the “holy box” of their spiritual credentials, their heritage in Abraham. John, the advance team for Jesus, announces that the Kingdom of Jesus busts that box and calls us to live in repentant fruitfulness. That kingdom seeks the lost, embraces the outcast, sustains the poor and mends the brokenhearted.

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The spiritual box I was in kept bursting. By the time I was about to graduate from seminary, ordination and parish ministry frightened me. Desperate about the narrow theological box that had captured the Lutheran church I’d grown up in, I was led yet again out of the box, this time to graduate studies in pastoral counseling. There I found God’s grace in the healing process of psychotherapy, learning to grow-up into mature faith. Finding God not only in Word and Sacrament, but in the holy process of therapeutic discovery and insight.

My ongoing discernment of God’s call led me to Anglican studies, finding in the Episcopal Church a fuller approximation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. In the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal priesthood, I felt rejoined to the breadth of my baptismal entry to communion with the prophets, the angels and all the saints who over the millennia proclaimed God’s loving embrace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And I am grateful to you, St. Timothy’s parish, and Fr. Marvin for the gift for nearly two years now to live out that priesthood in the daily & weekly round of parish life and liturgy.

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I didn’t choose to be ordained 45 years ago on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent. My discernment was never accompanied by voices directing me from heaven. Like so much of our lives, it’s just how it turned out. That would be the date, said the bishop.

But as I look back I see that being ordained in Advent was a perfect message for me about always preparing, always repenting, always being open to

God's surprising entry into our life, breaking apart the box of our presumptions.

The season of Advent, baptism, ordination: these and many more marker events in each of our lives instruct us to follow the call to bring God into our hearts and the world. God is always nudging us in the particularity of our personal stories to repent, to bear fruit and find Christ born again in the midst of the world's darkness. My call and your call is ultimately and simply to live as fruitful agents of God's justice, grace, mercy and peace in the world.

My father is right: *you don't make much money doing that*. But in Christ, we have riches beyond measure, for ever more.