

Biblical Background MATTHEW 11:2-11

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: The setting of this gospel opens with John the Baptist imprisoned by King Herod in Jerusalem. He is a political prisoner under guard because he has maintained that King Herod has taken the wife of his brother, Phillip, to be his own without benefit of divorce, annulment, and remarriage. Her presence in Jerusalem at Herod's palace is shameful. King Herod is enamored of John the Baptist and enjoyed listening to his teaching.

TERMS: *"swaying reed"* Jesus then speaks to the crowd about John. He uses images comical to the assembled masses, they did not go out to see a "swaying reed" - John was an oak! Nor did the Baptist dress in fine linen - he wore the most common fabric garment imaginable, one made of the hair of a camel, hard to come by and rather like burlap in feel. No, they went out to see a true Biblical Prophet and they were not to be denied.

"greatest among those born of women" Jesus then uses middle-eastern exaggerated speech when he honors John with the phrase stating that "among those born of women (everyone!) none was greater than John the Baptist". That is high honor praise that places the opinion of Jesus about John in its proper context.

CULTURAL INSIGHT: John the Baptist is NOT confused about the identity of Jesus. John the Baptist is the older cousin of Jesus by six months and has grown up with him throughout the course of their lives together. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were quite likely frequent guests of the parents of John the Baptist, Zachariah and Elizabeth who lived in Ein Karim, a small village only about two miles from Jerusalem. John's father was a Priest and perhaps was the one who introduced Jesus to the elders in the Temple in the story of the lost Jesus found in Luke chapter 2.

Jesus greets the disciples (students) of John the Baptist in Galilee and then spends time with them. After this time away they are sent back to John with a message that he would understand to mean that he had revealed himself to these disciples of John (students) as the Messiah. Only God alone, through his agent Jesus, could perform the miracles that they witnessed. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah (chapter 35) as a proof text that he is accomplishing in his public ministry what only God would do through His chosen and anointed Messiah. When the disciples of John relate this text to the Baptist he would be assured that these men would find their way to Jesus once he is gone.

INSIGHT INTO MEANING: The Kingdom "breaking out" is another Middle Eastern image from the world of the Middle Eastern shepherd that illustrates the opening of the temporary restraints that have held the flock in a pen throughout a long night. In the morning that temporary barrier is removed by the shepherd, it is a rather violent act of tearing the barrier away, and the sheep burst forth joyfully into the morning light. That is how Jesus envisions the growth of the Kingdom of God. John the Baptist was that shepherd who broke down the barrier, and Jesus will be the one to lead the joyful flock forward, advancing out into the world.

Family Activities

SHARING THE MISSION AT HOME
AND IN THE WORLD



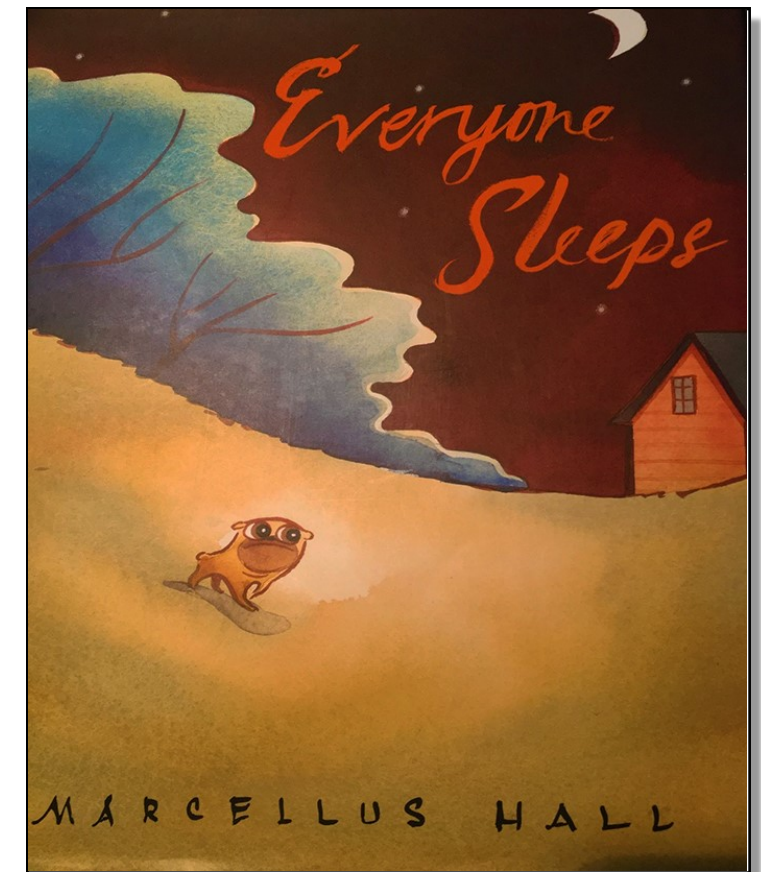
QUESTION OF THE WEEK: How do children share in the special mission of John the Baptist in waking people up at this time of year?

CHARACTER QUALITIES: SEEING WITH THE HEART
RECEPTIVITY

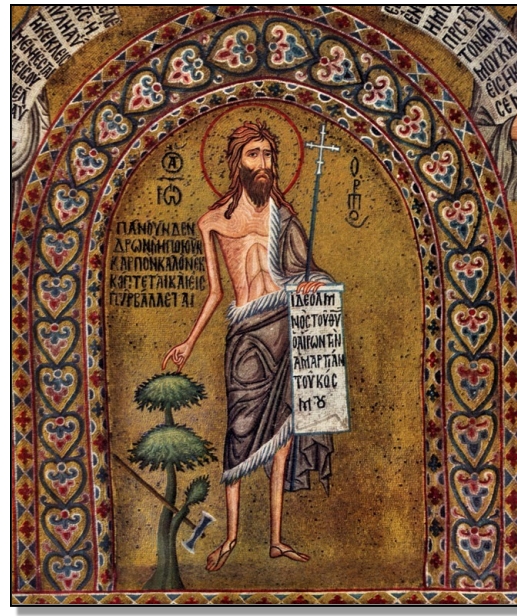
ADDITIONAL FAMILY ACTIVITIES: Make a "Wake Up" bulletin board with sticky notes next to it. Make this an activity for parents to let their children know they want to listen to them. Every day after school ask the children to write on a sticky note and put on the board what need they want the world to "wake up" to. Let them have a time at dinner to share with parents what they see!

Living Grace Cycle A 3rd Sunday of Advent

"WAKING UP TO TRUE SALVATION"



In Everyone Sleeps the sun has set and the whole family has gone to bed, except for their dog, Conrad, a funny little goggle-eyed pug. Curious to find out if anyone else is awake, he wanders far and wide - through fields and forests, across lakes and oceans - only to find all creatures asleep. Conrad is wide-awake, although counting a herd of snoring sheep does make him drowsy! He finally gets back home to find his own little girl still awake.



JOHN THE BAPTIST ANNOUNCING THE MESSIAH
Mosaic by unknown artist ~ Mid 12th Century
Cappella Palatina ~ Palermo, Italy

EXPLORING THE ART:

Mosaics is a technique where an image is made from the assembling of small pieces of colored glass, stone, or other materials. It is often used in decorative art or as interior decoration. Most mosaics are made of small, flat, roughly square, pieces of stone or glass of different colors. Some, especially floor mosaics, are made of small rounded pieces of stone and called pebble mosaics.

Mosaics have a long history, starting in the 3rd millennium BC all the way into modern times. Mosaic art was used in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, and in early Christian basilicas from the 4th century onwards. This technique flourished in the Byzantine Empire from the 6th to the 15th centuries and was adopted in Sicily, Venice, and Ukraine in the 12th century. Roman and Byzantine influence led Jewish artists to decorate 5th and 6th century synagogues in the Middle East, and mosaics were also used on religious buildings and palaces in early Islamic art.

In the 12th century, Sicily adopted the Byzantine tradition of mosaic decoration. Greek masters working there developed their own style, that shows the influence of both Western European and Islamic artistic tendencies. For instance, clusters of four eight-pointed stars, typical for Muslim design, are arranged on the ceiling so as to form a Christian cross. The Byzantine style mosaics of the Palatine Chapel (as the mosaic image above) are of unparalleled elegance with elongated proportions, streaming drapery, and subtle modulations of color and luminance. The mosaic above shows John the Baptist announcing the Messiah with some symbols of his call to the people including the axe at the foot of the tree, the winnowing fork in his hand, and his unkempt look.

Modern mosaics are made by professional artists, street artists, and as a popular craft. Many materials other than traditional stone and ceramic tesserae may be employed, including shells, glass and beads. You are invited to see and touch the mosaic tiles used for prayer and reflection along a self-guided tour of the Prayer Garden in our very own St. Bridget Spirituality Center!

Sunday Gospel

MATTHEW 11:2-11

When John the Baptist heard in prison of the works of the Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus with this question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: *Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.* Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

CHILDREN AS GOD'S PROPHETS OF AWAKENING

It was customary in the first century, that a herald would come to town before the arrival of an important person to "wake the people up" to meet the dignitary that was about to grace their community. This bit of background is helpful in understanding the role and the mission of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus. In today's reading John is found in prison, he sends some of his followers to check in with Jesus inquiring if this is the time and place for unfolding the mission and purpose of Jesus.

Jesus replies that yes he is the one, the one who does the work of God in bringing salvation to the broken and the lost. This is not the kind of "saving work" that the people were expecting. Jesus uses this opportunity to illustrate who a real savior is. A real savior is personal and communal; a real savior cares about the poor and has the ability to help the blind see, both spiritually and physically. Jesus proclaims, that a real savior opens our ears!....wakes us up!.... speaks words and messages that set our hearts free! Jesus offers a very different picture than the military leader that inflicts death to win the victory. And yes, this Savior is He.

The struggle for John the Baptist was in waking people up to be ready to receive the Christ, Jesus. Jesus came into the world to restore us to the Father, the Creator of the world and to each other. This is the establishment of the peaceable kingdom. So much greater and so much more that winning a military feat.

Our story of Conrad the pug can help us understand the mission of John the Baptist and the message of Jesus. As Jesus said, "that as great as John is.....only the least of the kingdom are greater than he". And Jesus tells us in another part of the gospel of the little ones, of the children, "The kingdom of God belongs to these" (Luke 18:17). Just like the little girl in the story who Conrad the pug found awake. Do we have our eyes open? Our hearts ready? Are we awake? That is the question we ponder each Advent.

There are so many needs around us for love, healing and restoration. What needs is God waking you up to? What needs is he asking you as a family to pour forth in your love, gifts and care? In this season we bring the "little ones" into the center, the children. Jesus comes to us as a baby. Maybe this is the graced pathway that God gives us each Christmas - the opportunity through children to open our hearts.

Let's let the "little ones" be our messengers sharing in the work of John the Baptist this Advent, leading us into the hands of Love, in to the Heart of Christmas!

Making the Connections

YOUR STORY: What do you have your eyes set on this Advent/Christmas season? Will it help to bring healing and wholeness in the world? What needs around you do you think God might want you to wake up to? How might you help others wake up to this need as well?

THE CHILDRENS' STORY: What was the problem in the story? What was Conrad trying to do? What are ways we might wake people up?

THE GOSPEL STORY: Why was John the Baptist trying to get people to "wake up"? What are ways we might wake people up? What do you think God wants people to do once they wake up? How is your role as children really important in the lives of adults around you? How are you really important to Jesus?

How can you help Jesus with his mission of bringing healing and wholeness to the world. Share one thing you are going to do before Christmas to wake adults up.