

WILD JOHN AND HOMELESS JESUS

MATTHEW 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 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. Even now the ax 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. “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. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

A couple of years ago an artist by the name of Timothy Schmalz spotted a homeless man sleeping on one of the busiest streets of Toronto. It was the Christmas season, and Schmalz saw the person-he didn't know if it was a man or a woman-huddled in a sleeping bag on a busy street corner with a pile of clothes lying next to the sleeping body. Immediately the artist thought that the person was Jesus, and during the next 18 months he sculpted the Sleeping Jesus out of bronze.

When Timothy Schmalz approached two churches in North America about housing his completed work, he was rejected. Ironically, Homeless Jesus had no home. The work, inspired by Matthew 25-"I was homeless, and you gave me a place to sleep"-depicts a shrouded Jesus with his nailed scarred feet exposed, sleeping on a bench. After the sculpture was blessed by Pope Francis last month, the piece was temporarily placed outside a church in Ontario, where it was stolen.

Although the Bible tells us that the real Jesus had "nowhere to lay his head", many of us don't want to accept his homelessness. We cannot imagine the Messiah lying under a blanket on a park bench. We assume that God wants his followers to be healthy and wealthy. Some of us even blame the poor around us for their predicament.

If pushed, we might invite a homeless Jesus into our heart, but we would still have trouble inviting him into our *home*. So what would you do if you were encountered by a deranged man like John the Baptist. If you are anything like me, you might run away. In the third chapter of Matthew, John thunders away, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near", and "prepare the way of the Lord". Matthew tells us that John wears "clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist," eats locusts and wild honey and screams insults at religious leaders, calling them a "brood of vipers".

Jesus the homeless seems harmless, lying quietly under a blanket on a park bench. But Wild John? He sounds like a deranged street-person, one who shouts at passersby on sidewalks. John and his disciples were the kind of guys you might see in a major city, congregating in alley ways, standing around a fire burning in a trash can, and scrounging thru the dumpsters looking for food and clothing.

We find John the Baptist out in the wilderness, preaching hell fire and brimstone near the river, and hordes of people coming out to hear him and be baptized. Some people thought he was the reincarnated OT prophet Elijah, who never died but was said to have ridden a chariot to heaven, while others said John was the Messiah. But John would have none of it: "I'm the one yelling himself blue in the face in the wilderness," he said, quoting Isaiah. "I'm the one trying to knock some sense into your heads".

One day who should show up but Jesus. John knew who he was in a second. "You're the one who should be baptizing me," he said, but Jesus insisted, and so they waded out into the Jordan together, and it was John who did the honors.

John apparently had second thoughts about Jesus later on, however, and it's no great wonder. Where John preached hell's fire and depicted God as a vengeful ogre, Jesus preached forgiving love and pictured God as the host at a marvelous party or a father who can't bring himself to throw his children out even when they spit in his eye. Where John said people had better save their skins before it was too late, Jesus said it was God who saved their skins, and even if you blew your whole bankroll on liquor and sex like the Prodigal Son, it still wasn't too late. Where John ate locusts and honey and abstained from alcohol in the wilderness with the church crowd, Jesus ate what he felt like and drank fine wine and beer in Jerusalem with as sleazy a bunch as you could expect to find. Where John crossed to the other side of the street if he saw any sinners heading his way, Jesus seems to have preferred their company to the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Stewardship Committee, and the church choir all rolled into one. Where John baptized, Jesus healed.

Finally John decided to settle the thing once and for all and sent a couple of his disciples to put it to Jesus straight. "John wants to know if you're the One we've been waiting for or whether we should keep looking," they said, and Jesus said, "You go tell John what you've seen around here. Tell him there are people who have sold their seeing-eye dogs and taken up bird-watching. Tell him there are people who've traded in aluminum walkers for hiking boots. Tell him the down-and-out have turned into the up-and-coming and a lot of deadbeats are living it up for the first time in their lives. And three cheers for the one who can swallow all this without gagging". When they asked Jesus what he thought about John, he said,

"They don't come any better, but when the Big Party Up There really gets off the ground, even John will look like small potatoes by comparison".

Nobody knows how Wild John reacted when his disciples came back with Jesus' message, but maybe he remembered how he had felt that day when he'd first seen Jesus heading toward him through the tall grass along the riverbank and how his heart had skipped a beat when he heard himself say, "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world", and maybe after he remembered all that and put it together with what they'd told him about the birdwatchers, deadbeats and the aluminum walkers, he decided he must have been right the first time.

There is a place in this world for Wild John. The real question is, is there a place in your heart for Homeless Jesus?