

## A COSTCO ENCOUNTER

December 06, 2009  
Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

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*With special thanks to Rev. Rhonda Colby who first met John the Baptist and shared her story with me.*

Funny, so many of the images of Advent encourage us to quiet and calm, centering and reflecting. Yet, every Advent, John the Baptist screams onto the scene of the lectionary. And even though the Baptist's countenance is any thing but shy and retiring, since he shows up every year on the second Sunday of Advent, we pastors, wonder if anyone will notice.

A few years back, I convinced a parishioner in one of the churches I served to play John the Baptist in a skit for the children's message. Dressed for the part in hairy attire, howling "Prepare ye the way" up the center aisle, she was so convincing as the warbling wilderness man that we had more than a few frightened toddlers that year – and *my* image of John the Baptist was forever changed. Yet, as I was preparing for today's version of the John the Baptist message, I found myself wondering if his "in your face", startling message had become just one more anticipated reading. Could we really be surprised into watchfulness this season? Was there some way that this wacky figure could make the rough places plain and smooth out the wrinkles in our preconceptions about Advent – and about Jesus Coming?

Maybe if we could just meet John the Baptist, this desert wild man who lived on locusts and honey, this scratchy screamer who announced that Jesus was coming and that people had better get ready. Maybe if we had someone act out the story we might be able to see beyond the messenger all the way to Jesus... Well, you know - God is such an amazing God. The other day, when I went out to pick up some groceries and check out some Christmas presents for Alexander and Aaron, I met John the Baptist—at Costco.

It was really weird to see this disheveled, wild-eyed guy – out in suburbia. I mean, what did he do, drive his mini van to the parking lot to set up shop? I'm used to men and women asking for change in downtown Boston and as I drive from JP to the highway – but let's face it—you don't get a lot of that in Reading—or on Route 1 in Danvers. Yet there he stood, right by the entrance of the parking lot – and he held up a make-shift sign – made out of a torn cardboard box.. I presumed it was asking for spare change, but in fact, as I got close enough for my old eyes to see, it read, "It's time for a change."

Well, I was in a hurry and frankly, didn't think much more about him – except maybe to wonder how long the Costco staff would let him stay on the premises. I got my cart and did my typical Costco power shopping walk-through – bread, meat, chicken, vegetables, stuff for salad, juice, eggs, milk and a chicken pot pie.

Then I flew through the toy section to see if there was anything that might interest the boys. I lingered for a moments at the book table, but remembered the 6 novels sitting by my bedside unread--so I moved on and found the Christmas decorations, picked up a few bulbs and some wrapping paper. Then I made it to the check out aisle – it wasn't too bad – they really move you along at Costco. I exchanged a few holiday pleasantries with the staff with whom I have become friendly and a few other harried shoppers while I scratched off a couple more items from my "to do list".

As I stood in the line to leave the store – I reached into my wallet for some extra change. I'd noticed one of those ubiquitous red kettles outside. Ever since I became a mother, I developed a policy of never passing a Salvation Army kettle without putting something into it – although I wish Santa would still staff them instead of some grumbling soul who never even looks up at you. Anyway – it's an easy way to help your kids think about helping others. So, with my Costco cart heavy and overflowing and my fist full of change, I was out of the building. I heard the bell; but there was no kettle, only John the Baptist ringing the bell and still holding the sign, "It's time for a change." He *certainly* did not look like the Salvation Army Santa's I remembered from my youth. And he looked me square in the eye.

"Nice sign", I said. "If it's change you want I've got some right here in my hand." I thought I was being witty. He was clearly not amused.

"Are you prepared?" he asked, with intimidating intensity.

“Well, not yet. Of course I never am. I’m a real last minute shopper – the ultimate procrastinator. But this is a start.”

“Here, let me help you,” he said. Again, he held my gaze.

I wondered what he could do to lighten my burden. “Let me help you take these things to your car. I can help unload them from the cart. Then I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

“Wait a minute, you’re the one standing out here in the cold with the sign.” Shouldn’t I be the one buying?”

He didn’t say a word. He just tucked his sign under his arm and took control of the cart. About the same moment I pressed the key fob to open the trunk, my phone rang and I pulled it out to see who I was screening. He said quite seriously, “Ah, one of those berry things. You’d better bring that with you.” So for some reason, I followed his instructions, and followed him back into Costco.

There in the snack bar, over a hot cup of coffee, this stranger tapped his way through my blackberry and my life – my lists and schedules, my emails and addresses. Most of the time he just shook his head. Occasionally he would let out a disapproving groan. Once he mumbled something sarcastic under his breath. I felt like a schoolgirl who was watching a teacher grade a test and then realized that I hadn’t answered one question correctly.

Then he brightened up. “O.K. Here’s something I like,” he finally said. “Get rid of clutter. Clear a path.’ Tell me about that.”

I explained that I have a terrible time with paper, books, and stuff, and they seem to take over the spaces out of which I operate. His shoulders fell with disappointment, and he went back to his review. When he had finished reading, he walked over to the condiment area and brought back a couple of fresh napkins. Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out an old pencil stub. It was the kind you use in miniature golf, and it was worn down to half its size – but it was freshly sharpened as if prepared for this very moment. He smoothed the napkin, being sure to flatten any bends, wrinkles, or raised places. He then touched the tip of the pencil on his tongue and wrote for me a new list. I watched in silence as this vagabond in the suburban wilderness wrote intently for the pages of *my* priorities.

At the top of the page he wrote in all capital letters, “DO LIST.” Number one said, “Hold a baby.” I laughed to myself thinking, “My 9 year old still crawls into my lap for cuddles, and I love it, but believe me, my days are numbered. He won’t want to be held much longer. And my 16 year old hasn’t let me touch him for years. My baby holding days are over!” It seemed a strange instruction. But, before I could tell him I had held and fed and diapered two sons, that I was a pastor and got to hold and baptize babies with some regularity, I heard a woman next to me let out a squeal. Her toddler had climbed up on another shoppers cart to get a closer look at a stuffed Tickle-me-something-or other and the kiddo was teetering. Without a word between us, she passed me her very tiny, weeks old newborn to hold as she ran after her little climber.

I looked down at the bundle she had placed in my arms. He was so tiny, so fragile. You know, you do forget what it’s like to hold a newborn. I swear he reached for my face with his delicate hand. The Muzak on the store’s sound system played an instrumental version of “What Child is This...who laid to rest, on Mary’s lap is sleeping..?” and for a moment I wasn’t in Costco – but in Bethlehem. I was holding close to me the tiny body of the one whose body would be broken for me. That tiny hand reaching for me was the hand that would reach out to embrace the cosmos and then - bear a nail on my behalf.

Too soon, an announcement broke into the moment and the mother returned for the baby. I glanced back at my planner and saw “DO” Number two: “Wonder.” John the Baptist had written down just a single word – “Wonder”. Wonder what?

Wonder why God chose a helpless little baby to bring salvation into a hostile world? Wonder why after thousands of years we still hadn’t gotten the message? Wonder when Christ will come again? I wondered. I wondered what to wonder. And I wondered some more.

Another announcement came over the loudspeaker. Costco was closing. Bring your final purchases to the register. Where had the time gone? How long had I been sitting there?

I looked around, but didn't see John anywhere. I glanced down at the third item on my DO LIST. "Look to the stars." Now what did *that* mean? I gathered myself up and headed for the door.

As I walked outside I heard a plane overhead. I looked up to see a clear sky, full of stars. There were thousands of them. More beautiful than the lights on any Christmas tree. They took my breath. And I hadn't had to work to put them up. I hadn't had to untangle the cords or check for dud star-bulbs. This light display required no extension cord. It was placed there as a gift, an unmerited spectacle of wonder.

There in the Costco parking lot, looking into the night sky, I had a strong sense that I had been looking in the wrong place for Christmas. I had already gotten too busy planning, preparing, and racing around – to look up. I had been too busy worrying about what I had to – so that I forgot to appreciate what had already been done for me. I had been so preoccupied with following the crowd that I had neglected to follow the star.

As I gazed into the night sky it seemed that one star was shining a little brighter than all the rest. Remembering the stranger's admonition I followed it. Perhaps it would lead me to Bethlehem. As I walked through the cold night, to my amazement, the light of the star seemed to fall upon... my dirty white minivan.

And there, in the starlight I could just see the cardboard sign, tucked under my windshield wiper. "It's time for a change," the sign reminded me.

My friends, as you go on about your week, I pray that you might know in the deepest places in your soul, that no matter how your Advent season is going so far, it is not too late. It is not too late to hold a child. It's not too late to wonder. It's not too late to follow a star. It's not too late for a change. Take it from me. I know it for a fact. Cos' I heard it the other night when I met John the Baptist at Costco.