**Introduction**

Have you ever anticipated the arrival of someone important or a loved one? I know that I have. When I was in the air force, we once had a visit at our military college from Paul Hellyer who was Minister of National Defense at the time. Many years later I met him at a concert in Toronto. When I mentioned his visit to Royal Roads, he remembered it well and told me how an admiral that he met in the college library was not too impressed when he pointed out a book in the library with the chronicles of Nelson was in the fiction section!

As a child growing up in Saskatchewan, we once had a brief visit from the Governor General of Canada. I have forgotten his name but do remember that he gave us the day off from school.

Of course there were other times when my family in Toronto had visits from relatives living in Western Canada. That included my mother, an aunt, one of my brothers and my sister after my late wife’s passing.

The theme for this third Sunday of Advent week is **the arrival of God**. There are several scriptures that herald the arrival of God.

**Zephaniah** speaks words of comfort about God’s arrival – bringing the people home, saving the lame and gathering the outcast.

# Zephaniah 3:14-17 (ESV)

*14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil. 16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Fear not, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. 17 The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

**Isaiah** alsospeaks about the day of God’s arrival, when they will “draw water from the wells of salvation.”

# Isaiah 12:2-6 (ESV)

*2 “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” 3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 And you will say in that day: “Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. 5 “Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”*

**Philippians** talks about how the Lord is near, and we should let our gentleness be known to all, not pointing to ourselves, but to him. These words anticipate the arrival of God, when his Spirit moves unmistakably, and we can only stand back in awe.

# Philippians 4:4-7 (ESV)

 *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.  Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Luke 3, on which this message is based, tells us about John the Baptist, or “Crazy John” as he’s been called. John’s great moment was to announce the arrival of God and get off the stage. He announced that arrival, and Jesus appeared.

**Luke 3:7-17 (ESV)**

***7****He (John) said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?****8****Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.****9****Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

***10****And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?”****11****And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics[**a**] is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.”****12****Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”****13****And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”****14****Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation and be content with your wages.”*

***15****As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,****16****John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.****17****His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

Have you ever had one of those friends who was maybe a little strange? An eccentric who lived out of sync with the rest of the world? Someone who perpetually wore styles a decade old. Went barefoot in the winter? Was always off in their head? And yet also spoke truth? Sometimes outsider folks like this have insight the rest of us don’t.

My late brother-in-law was like that. Sometimes he would dress up in a pilot’s uniform though he had never flown a plane. He sported a beard when most of the men around him were clean shaven. He would wear a vest and tie on the hottest day in summer while working in the garden. The frames for his glasses were 30 years out of style. His favorite activity was tending to his archives that served to record every significant and insignificant event in his life. In spite of his eccentricities he was a brilliant pianist who appeared on the local television channel in Peterborough, ON and was given the Kiwanis Musical Festival award for outstanding performer.

But back to an eccentric character and cousin of Jesus.

“Crazy John” is what they called him on the popular TV series “The Chosen.” He looked the part – hair going out in all directions, eyes a little crossed, and, other than the occasional baptism, no bath in quite a while. Most of the time, when we see John the Baptist portrayed in a movie or art, Crazy John is an accurate description.

He’s certainly not someone we think about at Christmas, especially passages like the lectionary reading this week. Brood of vipers, ax at the root of the tree, unquenchable fire – not exactly the “good tidings we bring” choruses we are used to hearing this time of year.

But it’s important to keep the whole life of Jesus out in front us, not just stick to some favorite parts. The manger led to the cross; his baptism led to his crown of thorns. And, in a similar way, his brutal death had his resurrection on its heels; his anguished night prayers became songs of glory.

In the end, Crazy John is a perfect reading for Advent for a few reasons, and that’s what we’ll explore today:

* Crazy John spoke in riddles.
* Crazy John was insanely bold.
* Crazy John lived upside down.
1. **Crazy John spoke in riddles**

Stones. Trees. Threshing wheat. These were the concrete metaphors that were all around the people in the ancient world. These were the riddles that Crazy John used to get people’s attention.

If we push back further, we can see that some of these riddles connected with the story of Israel. The ax is already at the root of the trees (v. 9). John is connecting them with the Israel narrative, specifically from Isaiah.

*(**Isaiah 6:13 ESV**)*

*And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.*

Isaiah, and John by quoting Isaiah, speaks to them of God’s judgment when Israel strays from him. Cut down the mighty tree, in this case Israel, and the remnant remains.

The issue in John’s era, among others, was that God’s people were relying on their heritage instead of acting like God’s people. Many times, John and Jesus reminded the people of Israel that knowing God is a matter of heart, not heritage.

*(**Luke 3:8 ESV**)*

*For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.*

The ax is at the root of the tree because the people had strayed from God and relied instead on their rituals and heritage. God himself is on the move and about to come and set things straight—in person.

Finally, a threshing floor. In Jesus’ day, you had to separate the wheat from the chaff. The wheat was the kernel that could be eaten or made into bread; the chaff was the useless shell that needed to be thrown away.

The threshing floor was a packed dirt or rocky flat area where the wheat was laid out to dry. Threshing floors were often on a hill so the wind could blow away the useless husks of chaff. When the wheat was dry, the farmer would use a winnowing fork or fan to throw the wheat into the air. The chaff would blow away and the heavier kernels would fall to the ground. It was about separating, taking away the useless from the useful, the bad from the good.

So far, this doesn’t sound like your usual Christmas fare. Not a lot of babies in mangers and songs to sing at this point— this sounds more like an earthquake.

Yet we have to remember that this earthquake of images was God on the move. The paradigm was shifting; the reality of God’s relationship with humanity was coming into focus. So, pardon the disruption! When God changes us, this is how it can feel – earth-shattering, growing pains.

Crazy John reminds us that advent and Christmas are not just about comfort and joy but transformation. Not only will you be immensely comforted and surrounded in love when you meet Jesus, but you will also never be the same. Everything changes. As the tag line in *The Chosen* series puts it, “Get used to different”.

The great writer and Christian apologist of the last century, C.S. Lewis, describes his own reluctant conversion in similar terms:

*You must picture me alone in that room night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.*

**2. Crazy John was insanely bold**

We have to look at who John the Baptist is talking to here. These are people who felt a spiritual hunger and thirst; those who were the most hypocritical and comfortable gave John a wide berth. The people here who say, *“What then should we do?”* (v. 10), are for the most part “good” people. These are the people who see there is something going on, something new happening, and they are drawn to that because their hearts are in some measure softened by God.

What John points out to the tax collectors, the soldiers, and the ordinary citizens are the everyday sins. These are the “understood” sins, the little sleight-of-hand, “everybody does that” kind of sins. He’s pointing out that your food and goods surplus belongs to the poor, and the “accepted” evils of the tax collector culture – skimming some off the top – is unacceptable. He points out that the “accepted” evils of the soldiers’ world – extorting people for extra cash, skimming off the top, too – is also unacceptable. Crazy John boldly points out – to all levels of society, no matter how high – that Jesus is here to take sin out by the roots, not to improve the building or remodel the building, but to demolish it and start rebuilding from the ground up.

We have such “accepted sins” in our own culture; sins that go against God’s design for our lives and our happiness. Being dishonest on our taxes, stealing small items from work, emotional infidelity, cohabiting, mistreating others. They are sins that go against sharing God’s love and purpose for our lives, but sins that our culture often looks on with a helpless shrug – that’s just the way things are.

When I worked in a hospital in Toronto prior to retirement I had a friend, a fellow runner, who once encouraged me to take some supplies I needed from the hospital stores that he had access to. I declined his offer.

A few days ago I participated in some online Rotary training. During one of the sessions we were introduced to three young women who were members of Rotaractors who are 18 and up. These young women are dedicated to serving and making a difference in the world locally and internationally. Very commendable but one of the young women just casually mentioned that she was sharing a basement apartment with her boyfriend. Yes, it is sad, but often our modern culture just shrugs and dismisses these common sins with a “Well, that is just the way things are.”

Unfortunately there are plenty of otherwise good and moral people who are in these circumstances.

John points out here that no sin, even the culturally acceptable ones, will work in God’s eyes. That’s not living in our true identity. He is pointing out that we don’t just need a slight modification of behavior or a refreshing of our perspective, but we need a new heart and soul. We need Jesus to take down our old concepts of righteousness and goodness and build the real thing in its place.

As we’ve pointed out earlier, Crazy John takes aim at the stock answer that many gave in those days: *We have Abraham as our father (v. 8).* Because they are ethnically Hebrew, God’s chosen people, many believed they would be excluded from God’s judgment. A word of judgment, from John the Baptist to them, would be unnecessary – even insulting – in their eyes.

That’s the other thing about Crazy John that upset the establishment – the kind of people he was baptizing. Baptism at that time was a ritual for the conversion of Gentiles into Jews. If someone didn’t grow up in their heritage, but wanted to join the Jewish faith, they used the water ritual of baptism to symbolize that.

But here John is *baptizing* Jewish people! This is like us telling Franklin Graham he needs to come forward for an altar call or offering to dunk our denominational leaders in the closest river!

Crazy John was insanely bold. He was causing not just a stir, but a revolution. Do we see that in our own lives – someone pressing us back on the Lord, reminding us again that we are incomplete without Jesus?

Think of all the humbling circumstances in life, of which there are many, and how they cause us to trust again in the one who created life. Think of even great evangelists like Ravi Zacharias who made such an impact for the kingdom and yet was helpless in the face of his own addictions and secret sins.

We all need a Savior, we are all on our knees before him, brought there by life itself. We all need the healing waters of Crazy John, no matter who we think we are.

**3. Crazy John lived upside down**

*(**Luke 3:16 ESV**)*

*John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

A century and a half before John, a Jewish revolutionary called Judas Maccabeus, started a successful revolution against the Seleucid Empire, which was the occupying power of the time. He’d started the movement by gathering the people in the wilderness to rally against the empire. Crazy John looked like he was doing the same thing again, this time against Rome.

Here he was, out in the desert, gathering the people. Needless to say, the people picked up his signals quickly and headed out to see what was going on. Crazy John caused a stir, even though this was not his ultimate plan. If he was like the rest of us, he might have been tempted to cash in on the fame this offered him, however short-lived.

But Crazy John was just the right kind of crazy.

Elsewhere, John had said:

*He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease. (**John 3:30 ESV**)*

Crazy John lived upside down. He didn’t want to see his name in lights; he didn’t want to grasp onto the unsatisfying fruit of fame. His greatest dream was to be part of God’s movement, and to disappear as soon as Jesus arrived.

I find it encouraging that others have embraced John’s statement of “He must increase, but I must decrease” and applied it in their personal life. A few years ago I met Maurice McElrea after he and his wife moved to our strata in Abbotsford. Maurice used to be the Executive Director of the Union Gospel Mission in Vancouver. He had served for many years in that role but felt that the time had come for him to retire. Someone else was appointed to succeed him. When referring to this transition from him to the new Executive Director, Mr. McElrea quoted John the Baptist’s poignant statement, *He must increase, but I must decrease*. A very graceful exit indeed.

Probably John’s most famous verse is “*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord” (**John 1:23 ESV**)*. These are the words of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 40:3), preparing for God himself to come through. Just after Crazy John quotes these words, Jesus arrives. John was announcing the arrival of God, and then almost immediately he disappears from the Gospels.

Crazy John was just the right kind of crazy. He lived outside of our expectations, he spoke bold truth to those in power, even to Herod, who eventually had him executed, and he laid it all down as soon as Jesus arrived on the scene.

What can we learn from Crazy John?

* **He spoke in riddles**. Crazy John’s words talked about God’s judgment – the fact that we need a Savior because we can’t make it on our own. This is a riddle to us, who sometimes think we’ve got it figured out or at least that someone does. John’s punchline is that we don’t need a tune-up, we need a complete overhaul, we need to learn to live life from the One who created it.
* **He was insanely bold.** John was a kind of free agent who spoke truth to all levels of society and even told the “professionally” religious people that they needed to meet God again. Do we live with this kind of boldness, standing up for those without a voice, living outside of the popularity contests and status seeking that run our world?
* **He lived upside down.** Do we step off the stage when Jesus arrives? Or do we steal the spotlight and make it all about ourselves? It’s far too tempting, especially when we have a listening audience, to forget that we are only the opening act. But when we remember this, we live in freedom! We are freed from our insatiable egos to step back and watch what God will do.

Are we the right kind of crazy? There is a lot we can learn from the wild-eyed prophet who walked out of the desert one day wearing camel hair and eating bugs to become the herald of the King himself.

Sometimes what appears to crazy at first proves to be truth in the end.

**\*\*\* finish in prayer \*\*\***

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