

Archbishop Rowan Williams once said, "the identity of the baptized is not first and foremost a matter of some exclusive relationship to God that keeps us safe, as opposed to the rest of the vulnerable and unlucky world. It is at one and the same time living both in the neighborhood of the Father and in the neighborhood of darkness. That is why we speak of being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ..." When I was a teenager, I was a non-denominational evangelical. That church told me that being a Christian meant that I was to live separate from secular society. Christianity was about being above reproach and not allowing the darkness of the world to tempt us.

We were asked to listen to only Christian music, see only family movies, and to dress in a way that didn't draw any attention. Essentially, we were to live only in the neighborhood of the light. Likewise, I've worked with children for almost 15 years now. Each year it seems children are being shielded more and more from the darkness of the world. I had a parent scold me once for informing her first grader that I would be absent because I would be attending a funeral. She didn't want her daughter to know about funerals apparently. I myself had feelings of guilt for taking my 1 year old son into the room with me when they put my childhood dog down. I cried like a baby and my son was truly scared for the first time. I thought I might have scarred him for life—seriously, I thought I might have just ruined his whole life with that one action. Luckily, I have an amazing husband who reminded me that our son is a human being and human beings will face sadness in their life—it doesn't ruin their life, it's part of their life. I'm glad my son was there. I'm glad my brother comforted him and my son learned that there is comfort in sadness.

I wonder how many other times fear kept me from living both in the neighborhood of the light AND the neighborhood of the darkness. I wonder how much I've missed because I wouldn't ground myself in a world that is unsafe? Fear, probably, has kept me from being truly great. The great that was given to me at birth by my creator. The great that all of us were born with—the purpose for which we were made. I think many of us will carry that greatness to our grave because becoming who God created us to be requires risk, courage, faith... it requires us to feel safe enough to live in the neighborhood of darkness because we trust that the darkness does not mean absence of light.

In today's gospel, John the Baptist appears in the wilderness proclaiming a baptism of repentance. It says he was clothed with camel's hair and ate wild locusts. It says he baptized people in the river Jordan. It says they confessed their sins. It says John was wildly, and directly proclaiming, "He is coming!" John, it seems, needed to wake people up. He was so panicked by the coming of Christ that he was shouting at people and dunking them in a cold river. It makes me wonder if the people of that time were having some of the same issues we are having now. Were they getting too comfortable? Had they forgotten that there IS a God and that God created them with purpose? Were they so afraid of the darkness of the world that they refused to see it all?

The answer must have been yes because John was terrified that the messiah was about to arrive... and the people were going to miss it. John knew that the

messiah would be found in the dark places of the world and if people refused to go into that place, they would never meet God face to face.

It's why John was so urgent with his message. It's why he was so panicked. John was so hell-bent on getting everyone prepared because he knew that Jesus couldn't just come into the world and play a harp and look at us lovingly and we would all suddenly realize our purpose and how we fit into the order of things. John knew that we needed to do some work *before* Jesus was born? John's alarm suggests that some self-awareness is required for awareness of God because what good is it that Jesus is born into the world if when he stands right in front of us, we miss him. Today's gospel suggests that John knew, some place deep in his soul, that this was all going to end on cross and if people weren't used to standing in both the light of the world and the chaos of the world, they wouldn't ever witness God in human flesh.

Repent, he says. He's not just talking about confessing our sins—letting God know we cheated or lied or hurt another person. Repent in today's gospel means "becoming new." Repentance is about waking up and not being comfortable. It's about looking deeply at our lives. Ask yourself today, why are you here? What brought you to this moment? Are you invading your own greatness because you're too afraid to explore your calling? Is your life the adventure you always imagined it would be or is your life just happening to you?

If I were to answer those questions when I was 22 and in a treatment center for bulimia, I would have been pretty disappointed with myself. Life was just

happening to me. I was not great. I was not living into my purpose... quite frankly, I'm not even sure you could have counted me as one of the living. Nonetheless, at a time in my life when perfection meant everything to me, I came across Toni Morrison's commencement speech to Wellesley College's graduating class and I found it so inspiring that I printed it out and I look at it any time I need to be reminded that "hard" means I'm alive. That "easy" doesn't mean good and that something real is far greater than something false pretending to be perfection.

My favorite quote from the speech is "if this is the best time of your life, you have my condolences... because there is nothing, believe me, more satisfying, more gratifying than true adulthood. The adulthood that is the span of life before you. The process of becoming one is not inevitable. Its achievement is a difficult beauty, an intensely hard won glory, which commercial forces and cultural vapidness should not be permitted to deprive you of." Yes, from my view point, adults are endangered species. The effect of this dying out species is that our children are being formed by empty, shallow people. Our children are holding up role models who do not possess any truth about the world. Children are watching from the sidelines as they are being taught that our society values entertainment, false happiness, money, perfection, popularity, and power above all else. They are being shielded from anything real.

I wonder what message the children of Israel were receiving at the time that John the Baptist showed up proclaiming a baptism of repentance. The adults of that generation needed to wake up. They needed to be shown that "the hard" is where life happens and it's worth it to step into those waters and risk fulfilling

their purpose. It was worth it to let go of every comfort they knew so that they could chase after something real, so that when Jesus interrupted John the Baptist that day, they all held their breath for a moment... because they knew God was in their midst.

Friends, we are in the season of Advent. It is time for us to wake up. It is time for us to look at our lives and ask ourselves if we are the people God created us to be. It is time for us to know our own strength and therefore step away from the fear that holds us back. During the season of Advent it is necessary that we are resilient, that we know our strength. It is necessary that we understand our own power—the power given to us at our baptism.

Because we too, at this moment, have been invited to be part of the greatest story ever told. We have been baptized and as the baptized, we are the people capable of living in both the chaos of the world and the light of Holy Spirit; because at our baptism we received the power of the spirit and we are equipped to conquer the darkness of the world with the shield of God's love and grace. Have we forgotten that? Do we remember that being the children of God means something? Do our lives reflect that truth or is our life a shell of what it could be, of what it's purposed to be? This Advent, we must repent. We must answer these questions and if we are not satisfied with the answers, we must be still and remember who we are. In the stillness, listen. Hear the voice of God that is whispering to you and see that you are not alone. You are in community with the whole of creation. And with the awareness of your communal bond, prepare the

way of the Lord. Conquer darkness, restore faith to a faithless people, and bring Christ back to the Earth. For you now, are John the Baptist.