

The View from a Salvage Kingdom
Advent 2A, Matthew 3.1-12
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The Rev. Scott Walters

The Glass Chapel of Masons Bend, Alabama isn't just for praying. It's an open-air community center, a transportation stop, a performance space for a local choir, and sometimes just a pleasant and curious spot for sitting. The building's low walls are made of rammed earth. Sheets of aluminum are spread over its ribs of laminated pine. But the most distinctive feature of the structure is its north roof, which is made entirely of windshields salvaged from old Chevrolet Caprices, lapped like scales on the flank of a great fish.

The Glass Chapel — or the Windshield Chapel, as it's come to be known — was built in the year 2000 by students from Auburn's Rural Studio. It cost a whopping \$15,000, and is one of the many Rural Studio buildings that are scattered across Hale County now. Among the others is a house whose walls were made by stacking 17,000 carpet tile remnants. One integrated huge bales of corrugated cardboard; another, old tires that were piled up, filled with dirt and stuccoed. Cast off road signs become a tin roof and glass bottles are mortared in among chunks of broken highway concrete to let little shafts of light into a smokehouse. And what you might not believe, given these descriptions, is that the buildings are beautiful. They're playful, exuberant, inexpensive, and they are surprisingly beautiful.

These buildings came to be because of an architect named Samuel Mockbee, a voice who, back in 1992, started crying out in a wilderness. Hale county is both poor and isolated — basic markers of wilderness by most American measures. More than a third of its residents live below the poverty line. Newbern, the Rural Studio's home base, is a one store town ten miles from the closest restaurant and 45 minutes from a movie theater. Sambo, as Mockbee liked to be called, chose Hale County for the studio's work because he was an architect who was guided by a radical moral impulse. "Everyone," said Sambo Mockbee, "rich or poor, deserves a shelter for the soul."

He would express this conviction in a little harsher, more John the Baptist-y tone to his fellow architects. who he wanted to spend more of their time and energy creating good and beautiful dwellings for the poor. It was high time for some repentance in the profession, he'd say. Time for a change of course. Another kingdom was at hand, and Samuel Mockbee wanted all people to have a dignified place within it.

John the Baptist did not come to proclaim the coming of affordable housing per se. But you may have your own example of someone who stormed into some desolate place, or maybe just some desolate life, and proclaimed boldly that things do not have to be as they are. Someone who said that God was about to do a new thing in a place that we humans had long forgotten, or abandoned, or ignored. Bring that person to mind as we consider the strange, disheveled character Matthew introduces us to in the third chapter of his gospel. It may help bring this familiar old story to life.

The stuff at the beginning of John the Baptist's appearance is nice enough. True, we're told to repent. But we're told to do so because the kingdom of heaven has come near. That sounds nice. A straight path must be made because something heavenly — which means wonderful, we probably assume — is coming our way.

But anybody with any manners at all begins to squirm a little when John turns to the Pharisees and Sadducees — or turns *on* them, actually. He tells them they're vipers. Poisonous snakes, which

were unclean creatures in the eyes of the Torah. But John's rant is about something very particular. It's about the smug assumption that having the right ancestry is what matters most to God.

And so John the Baptist frames a very basic distinction between two ways of seeing ourselves. One that's as relevant today as it was way back when. Do we believe that whatever lot we've been given in life entitles us to a certain status? Or is it a vocation, a call, a preparation to engage the world in a certain way? In the language of Israel's prophets, God chose and blessed the Hebrew people for a purpose: to be a light to other nations. When Israel went astray, they treated that blessing as a possession, as something that distinguished them from other people rather than something that bound them to those others. They fell away when they saw their chosenness as a status to be claimed for themselves instead of a gift for all people that was supposed to make its way into the world through their lives.

Now, if you, like me, happen not to be a Pharisee or a Sadducee, or better yet, if you're not even a biological child of Abraham at all, we can fall into a long Christian tradition of assuming John couldn't have been talking about the likes of us. We're gentiles. So we're among the raised up stones, not the vipers. We're the people *not* born into the tribe, but who are included in God's good kingdom anyway, right?

Well, these old stories may not change, but the world sure does. And so before we figure out what John the Baptist might have to say to us, we have to ask the question of whose status before God seems more like a birthright than a call in our time and place.

Say what you will about the decline of the Christian faith in the West, but try to get elected president without professing to be a Christian. Sure, some very public people say nasty things about Christians, but anyone who really thinks we're a persecuted minority must not have actually met a truly persecuted minority. No one gets an exemption from hardship and pain. But compare my lot in life with that of, say, the women and children we provided a little shelter for at Room in the Inn Friday night. To be white, Western, Christian, and male probably means that I was born into more unearned privilege than those poor Pharisees could have imagined.

In other words, even as a follower of the messiah John the Baptist was announcing, I may be right in the crosshairs of his rant. I may be the one who needs to turn around in the way I see things, which is what the Greek word John used for "repent" actually means. It means to turn around. Maybe I'm the one who claims my faith as a status rather than a calling to see the world from a different perspective, and to build a better world based on what it looks like from there, not here.

That sounds like bad news initially. But to turn completely around and to see oneself as nothing but a stone raised up by God, to see God's favor not as a birthright but as a gift, one that can transform us and transform our world ... to see ourselves like that is to have our lives lit up by grace. And it is to see the grace that is present in and extended by a loving God to every last soul we meet, whether they've come to know it, or believe it, or trust it or not.

There really may be a measure of grace in believing that we're the ones John was yelling at. There may be if we remember repentance isn't about feeling bad. It's about turning around. It's about changing our perspective on things. Changing our perspective on why people matter and where our true worth comes from.

It may even be helpful to look for those prophets who speak to lives like ours and to the blind spots of our particular vantage points here and now. Prophets who may be a little harsh, a little coarse, a little blunt, but people we know deep down are calling us to be our best selves, our truest selves, our God given selves.

If your lot in life is anything like mine, your Advent prophet this year might look like a late architect with a Mississippi drawl, an unruly beard, and a conviction that it was time for his own privileged people to see the world from a different direction, and then to build a new world based on what it looks like, not from the capitol and the board room, but from the wilderness. A place full of disused windshields and old tires, tin and broken concrete. A place where a person of vision can stand and say, "Repent! Turn around! Look at things from over here and then let's go build a world that is just and beautiful in equal measure."

Don't worry. We don't plan to use many cardboard bales and salvaged tires in our renovations at Calvary. But a further reason that Sambo Mockbee might be a good John the Baptist stand-in for our Advent is because the world he built wasn't grim. It wasn't angry. It was joyous and vibrant. The things he made were exuberant and playful, full of light and life and laughter. Something about letting go of his privileged place and seeing the world from Hale County's perspective liberated him, because he saw from there that beautiful dwellings should not and need not be available only to those in high places of wealth and power and status. Everyone, rich or poor, does deserve a shelter for the soul. Which means it may be down at a stone's eye view in the wilderness, whether a struggling rural town or an urban block of too much poverty and blight, where we can still get glimpses of the just and beautiful kingdom that is to come.