

More Than Mere Magic

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John the Baptist was really terrible at what we call “newcomer welcome.” And I say that as a church ministry professional. I could suggest some conferences and presentations on the finer points of welcoming people, but there’s a lot of low hanging fruit here — I’m not even sure he’s ready for a professional development seminar.

For example, when new people show up, it’s generally not recommend practice to call them a “brood of vipers.” Instead of threatening them with unquenchable fire, I might suggest an invitation to grab a cup of coffee.

Really, this stuff is just not that hard.

Even if John doesn’t like these Pharisees and Sadducees, and I think that’s a pretty fair read on the situation — don’t they still need the gospel? Don’t all people, even — maybe especially — Pharisees and Sadducees, need to hear the message? Why does John turn on them so quickly, so thoroughly, and with such verbal violence?

Perhaps it's because he's a hotheaded jerk. Or perhaps it's because John the Baptist is interested in real change, and he believes the Pharisees and Sadducees are interested in mere magic. This is where I think the answer lies, and I’m going to explain this in terms of the text from Matthew, so please go ahead and take it out if you haven’t already.

And as you do so, I simply want to note that this is a time of year — this “Happy Holidays” time of year — when magic is in the air, dusting flying reindeer, sitting on the shelf in the form of an elf. Christmas is susceptible to being wrapped up in mere magic; John the Baptist here calls us to something more as Christians. Christmas, for us at least, should be more than mere magic. It’s better that way.

Now why would I say that John the Baptist considers the Pharisees are Sadducees to be interested in magic? Look first at verse 9: “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.”

The second half to this, the stones into people part, is definitely the stuff of magic. I’m not disagreeing with John that God could do it; but God doesn’t do it. Also,

spoiler alert, Pinocchio doesn't come to life in the real world either! Because that sort of stuff is magic — and John's whole point here is that God isn't interested in doing magic tricks.

Now the first half of verse 11, the proposed claim, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' is also a particular sort of magic. It's the sort where God makes one thing (a self-righteous Sadducee) into another sort of thing (a holy person of God) because of a third, largely unrelated reason (Abraham). It's religious alchemy; the transmutation of spiritual iron and lead into spiritual gold. It's the religious equivalent of the Philosopher's Stone. And John the Baptist calls baloney.

John is unwilling to settle for magic because the Messiah whose coming he is proclaiming isn't going to do magic tricks — that stuff is real. Look at the verse 12: "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."

This is a real and earthy image. When Divine judgment is described in the New Testament — whether pictured here as wheat and chaff, or sheep and goats, wheat and weeds, good fish and bad fish — there's never a magic trick involved. Divine judgement is not the time when God turns some people into unicorns and others into frogs. It's when God separates what actually is.

John the Baptist doesn't want the Pharisees to depend on magic; he wants them to change. So, quickly, I want to point out three things that are different about real change and mere magic, three things that can be seen in this little passage, and three things that I think can help us all as we look to deepen and enrich our observance of this Christmas season.

First, change is future oriented. Magic looks to the past. You can see this plainly in the text. John is focused on what is coming — the kingdom of heaven, the one coming after him, the wrath to come, the ax lying at the root of the trees. All his imagery is about the future. Even more than that, he's out there in the river proclaiming a baptism of repentance, which is itself a future oriented word. We often miss this, equating repentance with confession, as though repentance were an admission of past sins. But the word means to turn around, to begin to go in a new direction. Repentance, what John the Baptist was out in the wilderness trying to get people to do, and then what Jesus began proclaiming as soon as he started preaching, repentance is about a bright future, not a bad past.

In contrast to John, the Pharisees and Sadducees turn to the past, to the supposed religious magic of being Abraham's descendants. John the Baptist looks at what is to come; these guys are still focused on what was.

It's really easy, at least for me, to make this same mistake at Christmas time. Even though in Advent the church calls us to look forward, it's really easy to let the nostalgia of Christmas-past take over. A past of well-behaved children, beautifully decorated stone churches lit with candles, harmonious family dynamics, the perfect Christmas Eve dinner, firesides and snow — you know, dreaming about Christmases just like the ones we used to know. Or at least ones we saw once in a Norman Rockwell painting.

There's nothing inherently wrong with Christmas past, nor was there anything wrong with being Abraham's children. They're good things bay there. But Christmas past cannot rule over Christmas present; too often, frankly, Christmas past terrorizes Christmas present, making this one feel inadequate, not as joyous, not as perfect. You know that feeling?

It's because we get distracted by the idealized memories, themselves no more than mere magic. And we can get so worked about the comparison between what is and what magically was, than we can forget the whole point of this season is what will be. Jesus would much rather we worry about how our Christmas observance is affecting our future than how this Christmas compares to one in the past.

So first, true change is future looking; magic looks to the past.

Second, magic is falsely confident, but true change is humble. In gospel terms, it's fruit-bearing, not self-proclaiming. See how John the Baptist in verse 8 says "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." That's fruit-bearing change. The words he ascribes to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "We have Abraham as our ancestor," well that's self-proclaiming.

The difference can be experienced very easily this season. Have you ever noticed how the kids who are worried about whether or not they've been good enough for Santa to bring presents almost always have been good. It's the ones who are blithely sure of themselves who you've got to be worried about; they're the ones that deserve the coal.

There was this kid in elementary school; let's call him Carl. Not his real name (cause, you know, I went to elementary school in the eighties). Any way, Carl, horrid little fellow. And yet he'd always talk about these great presents Santa was going to bring him because he such a good boy. He was self-proclaiming, not fruit-bearing.

And you know what was worse, he got the presents! I'll tell you, to seven year-olds, this situation raised a lot of red flags about Santa as a judge of character.

Anyway, God's interested in fruit-bearing, not self-proclaiming Carl's, or Pharisees, or Sadducees. Now...I'm not saying we have to earn our way to God. We get to God because he loves unconditionally and undeservedly — this is what we call grace.

What I am saying is it's the people who think they've earned it you've got to worry about.

Martin Luther, the leader of the German reformation who had such a deep understanding of God's grace, he developed that as he tried to be fruit-bearing on his own. It's because he realized what he couldn't do — namely that he couldn't get his life right on his own — that he came to know what God would do. The self-proclaiming person never sees that; it's the fruit-bearing person who comes to know God's love.

So... change is future looking, magic looks to the past. Second, change is fruit-bearing, magic is self-proclaiming.

Third, finally, and most importantly: change is real, magic is pretend.

Now, hopefully, that statement by itself doesn't blow your mind too much. The other night, Stephanie saw the magician David Blaine perform on the Tonight Show. Beginning to doubt the magic is pretend maxim, she spent the rest of the night watching YouTube videos of people explaining how the tricks worked.

But, even if this is not an original insight about the difference between change and magic, let me show you how it appears in the text. In verse 7, John addresses the Pharisees and Sadducees, "You brood of vipers!" As mentioned earlier, not super friendly. But then he says, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come." (John did, right? But anyway.)

But there is more to this image than verbal venom. The image John is using is that of a field being harvested or burned, and as the danger gets real, the snakes living in it will scurry out. It wouldn't have quite the same ring, but it's not unlike how a covey of doves will flush when hunting dogs get close.

John the Baptist is accusing them. He's saying "You're not really changing, you're just running away from danger."

That's not real change, that's pretend magic. You're trying to pull a fast one, John the Baptist says.

Or let's put it in Christmas terms: John the Baptist is the sort of guy who is entirely unsatisfied with children being temporarily well-behaved in the month of December for the purpose of getting presents on Christmas Day.

But that's not the sort of pretend magic I worry about at Christmas. That's for your parents out there to worry about.

No, the real danger in Christmas magic is the enormous amount of pressure this time of year to pretend. Pretend to be nice. Pretend to have more money than you

do. Pretend to forgive. Pretend to love Christmas music. Pretend to be excited by Uncle Albert's present. Pretend to have your act together. Pretend to be generous. Pretend to be happy.

That one, above all: pretend to be happy.

You know, just wave the Christmas magic wand around and make it all alright. The idea that like a dusting of snow, the magic of the Christmas season can suddenly fix all this stuff, it makes by blood boil. It's not true, it's pretend.

This important things in that list, being nice, wealth, forgiveness, getting control of life, generosity, happiness — those things take change, not magic. The greatest of our Christmas movies, things like A Christmas Carol, How the Grinch Stole Christmas, A Charlie Brown Christmas, Home Alone, even Elf — they all recognize that a real Christmas takes more than mere magic, it takes change.

If there's something in your life that needs change this season, don't miss out on this opportunity. You know what it is. Christmas is a great chance for change. Make a change that is forward looking, affecting your future — not one that tries to change the past. Make a change that aims to bear real fruit in your life, don't proclaim your own greatness you are. And don't pretend.

Don't settle for mere magic this Christmas season. Christ is coming to do a new and powerful thing — and not just to a manger in Bethlehem, but to a home in McKinney or Frisco. May it be yours. Christmas is more than mere magic; welcome the change that Jesus Christ can bring into your life. Amen.