

To (Not) Be Worthy [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Matthew 3:1—12

They discovered them beneath a church altar. On an island in the Black Sea, off the coast of Bulgaria, alongside a marble sarcophagus and placed in an ornate box, Eastern Orthodox officials found what they believe to be the metacarpal bones of John the Baptist. Evidently, the theory is, some medieval monk had placed them there in the tenth century; and now that this thumb- knuckle has been carbon-dated to the first century and that the DNA matches that of a man from the Middle East, there's good reason to be impressed. Those calcium-phosphate remains are worth something—which doesn't mean they're for sale. It means, through the centuries, relics like these have been venerated in worship; and *worship*, as I've mentioned before means to ascribe ultimate worth. But here's the problem: in the gospel reading for today, John the Baptist himself has said he's NOT WORTHY. In fact, when it comes to the very thumb-knuckle which has been preserved for posterity—he tells us explicitly in Matthew 3:11—it's not worthy of carrying the sandals of the Messiah who is to come.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; and I am not worthy to carry his sandals...”

And likewise, in the gospels of Mark, Luke and John, he's not even worthy enough to *untie* the leathery straps of those sandals, which probably would have required an opposable thumb.

So what do you think? Should we call the church officials in Bulgaria and tell them not to get so worked up over some bones that aren't so worthy of praise? Should we tell them—should we tell anybody who's willing to listen about the One who ***“will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire”***? It seems to me, while our own bones are still encased and fully functioning within our bodies, that we have options.

Before going any further, however, I'd like to put the ideas of WORTH or WORTHINESS in context. And I need to do this primarily because WORTH is often perceived as a matter of opinion and taste. What I find *worthy* and *worthwhile*, you may not. And we all can agree to disagree. My younger son, Philip, has gone on record when it comes to fancy restaurants; he says, that no main course that costs over \$20 is really worth it. The delectability of those small morsels, decorated with parsley, just doesn't cut it. And I get where he's coming from. On the other hand (the hand with metacarpal bones) pay attention to the visionary experience which is being depicted in the Book of Revelation. What's on the menu is LAMB—the LAMB OF GOD, that has been slaughtered; and in Revelation 5:12 (among other places) the heavenly voices lift up this eternal song: ***“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered...”*** And slaughtered, not just at age 33 when Jesus was crucified, but according to Revelation 13:8, ***“slaughtered from the foundation of the world...”*** So, you see, now we're talking about WORTH and WORTHINESS which has to blow every opinion and every question of taste away.

In a recent *New York Times* article, I read how certain acolytes of the Artificial Intelligence technology have created a 'Jesus Chat-Bot.' And if you don't feel like you have the time or the temperament to contemplate the WORTHINESS of the Lamb, you could always subscribe for free; and the 'Jesus Chat-Bot' will offer you some advice. Sprinkled into this wisdom, of course, will be scripture passages like ***“Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and all these things will be added unto you...”*** But if you want to learn more and go a little deeper, there's an upgrade of the 'Jesus Chat-Bot' available for \$39.99 per year. And who knows? Maybe it'll be worth it. But John the Baptist says it's not.

“But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit WORTHY of repentance. Do not begin 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.’”

Come on—let’s ask the question. When it comes to our approach to Christmas and to the spectacular ways we can celebrate Christmas, to what extent do we resemble the Pharisees and Sadducees? Are we being real with ourselves? I recall a trip my family took to *Disney World*. Our boys were around the ages of eight and ten, so we decided it would be worth it—worth it to buy the tickets, to stand in line... and there we were, with bated breath, finally, just about to enter *the Haunted House*. And so, we entered a dark room, where the walls moved; and we climbed into these vehicles that made loops in the darkness; and all along the spooky corridors, lights flickered, ghosts appeared and disappeared. And yes, we were entertained. It all seemed worth the price of admission. That is—until—suddenly, in the middle of the ride, every light in the house became dark; the vehicle in which we had been strapped came to a screeching halt. And let me tell you, *THIS* was the scariest and the most haunting part of the whole Disney World extravaganza!

Now, I’m not trying to be *Scrooge*. I’m not trying to be the *Grinch that Stole Christmas*. (Far from it.). But I am trying to understand why John the Baptist doesn’t feel as if he’s worthy to celebrate the Coming of Christ until he’s faced up to the brokenness and the darkness of the world. Are we ready? Do we want to become ready? Or are we just trying to enjoy ourselves, to distract ourselves, to feel good about ourselves?

Of course, one of the things about John the Baptist that's very awkward for us is that he's *off-the-grid*. He doesn't shop at *Safeway*; he eats locusts and wild honey. He doesn't dress himself with the latest fashion from *Kohls* or *Target*; he wraps himself in itchy camel's hair. John's an extraordinary figure—and the reason we acknowledge him during Advent is that he does his best work at the boundary places of each life. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, he's ankle deep in the Jordan River, through which the ancient Hebrews had crossed into the *Promised Land*. Since that great day, however, every superpower under the sun has trespassed through that same trickle of water. We're talking the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. And they all tried to establish their kingdoms by force and by leaving their muddy footprints on the foreheads of the poor and the most vulnerable. So, listen! Listen to the man whose metacarpal bones are lying in some box in Bulgaria: ***“Repent! The kingdom of heaven has come near...”*** In other words—*Change your minds! Have your minds changed! Don't think in terms of 'Divide & Conquer.' Don't think in terms of 'My way or the Highway.' And if we're wondering what possible worthwhile thing any of us can do on our end of this covenant bargain, in Matthew 3:8 the voice of the one crying in the wilderness tell us: ***“Bear fruit WORTHY of repentance...”****

This week, as I was pondering such “*fruit*,” my thoughts settled on the *Davenport Hotel*—and how twenty-five years ago Walt and Karen *Worthy* bought the building and proceeded to renovate its rooms, its amenities, its parking garage, its restaurants and its rest rooms. And to be clear, I’m personally grateful for their contribution to this community; and like we do every year, I plan on making a modest bid on a Christmas Tree display in support of the *Spokane Symphony*. And yet, here’s the fruit that comes to mind: back in 2013, a bunch of poets-in-training from Eastern Washington University were having a meal at the *Palm Court Grill*, and our professor had to use the facilities. Now, Jonathan Johnson is a renown poet and playwright, but he doesn’t necessarily dress up in the finest clothes; and on this day, with his long hair and his beard and his patched up jeans and his faded leather jacket, he appeared (I don’t know) maybe like John the Baptist. Anyway, while washing his hands in the marble sink of the restroom, a security guard came up to him and asked if he were a customer, a legitimate patron, a guest who was WORTHY enough to be there. And I don’t remember what happened after that... except maybe I do.

Fruit WORTHY of repentance is produced any time you and I come face-to-face with a child of God and we become curious and we treat them as if God’s Love has been intended for them since the foundation of the world—and then we also genuinely regret and reflect upon the times when we’ve not treated them like that. It’s that simple; and yet it’s that profound. The Pharisees and Sadducees who come to the river are coming to monitor or to check on the legitimacy of this wild preacher. They’re coming because, as religious experts, they feel privileged to take in the show. But it is no show. And without fruit WORTHY of a changed mind, they’re only as good as snakes giving birth to more snakes with their reptilian brains in the wheat field.

In the 1986 film, *The Mission*, starring Robert DiNero, a slave trader of the sixteenth century is just doing his job. He ventures into the jungles of South America, and by setting up nets along the footpaths, Rodrigo Mendosa captures hundreds of indigenous people and sells them to plantation owners. It's a very lucrative business. But one day, in a fit of jealousy, Rodrigo murders his own brother; and he feels so guilty about the incident, there's nothing for him to do but wallow and waste away in his prison cell. That is, until a Jesuit priest squats down next to him and says, "Is this repentance?" "Leave," replies the angry man. The priest then smirks, and Rodrigo says, "Are you laughing at me?" And the priest answers, "Yes, because what I see is laughable." But then he says, "Come with me!" 'Come to my mission among the Guarani people, whom you once ensnared in your traps.' And with fear and trepidation, Rodrigo agrees. And it's just the beginning.

The next few scenes in the film are really agonizing, as Rodrigo lugs a huge canvas sack of swords, bayonets and armor through the jungle. He finally gets to the people from whom he had stolen mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and children. And as one of the native warriors is holding a knife to his throat, he asks the Jesuits what this brutal enemy is doing there. The priest then tells him that Rodrigo is in the process of repenting... And that's when the native warrior (who himself is unlearning how to be a warrior) cuts the rope attached to the sack of weapons and let's the armor bang against the cliff face, where it dashes against the rocks and splashes into the river below. And, you see, now that I think about it, that couldn't have been what was happening around the Jordan River. It could be what happens around the Spokane River... And maybe it could be what's happening here... now... around *this* water. At this table.