

In the name of God, the creator, the redeemer, and the sustainer. Amen.

We hear from John the Baptist again this week on the "Brood of Vipers" Sunday, as it's known. Great day to be baptized, by the way. It's called Brood of Vipers Sunday with a sigh of dread by the assigned preachers of Advent III as it's certainly one of the more challenging gospel texts, and when I'm challenged by a difficult text, I try to imagine what it might have been like to actually be there. And so, my sermon today is an imagining, a fictional story about a 10-year-old girl named Miriam who goes down to the river to meet this John the Baptist. Here is Miriam's story.

If you ask the elders in my village about me, they probably would have a lot to say and most of it wouldn't be good. They would start by telling you that I'm never where I'm meant to be and I'm late for just about everything, but I can't help it if the best trees to climb are all the way towards the edge of the village. They've told me time and time again to stay in the center where the women can keep a closer eye on me, but what's going to happen to me? Nothing. Nothing ever happens here. They'll also tell you that I'm shy and I've never been interested in playing games with the other children. I'm just as happy tagging along with my mother and baby sister, Deborah. Deborah can't talk yet, and that's my favorite thing about her. You can know a lot about a person without so much as saying a word.

When my mother sends me out to play or to do a chore, I'll take the long route and end up climbing the fruit trees or going to visit my father in the pasture, and most often I lose track of time and before I know it, the sun is setting and the whole village has come looking for me.

My name is Miriam, a name my mother chose for me in honor of our ancestor, Moses's sister, who was there when the people were freed from the hands of Pharaoh. After they crossed the Red Sea, Moses and Aaron kept on walking, but Miriam, she played the tambourine. Sheer joy, my mother said, the same way she felt when she became my mother.

People always assume that because I was shy and liked being by myself so much that I wasn't paying attention to things, but I was actually paying more attention than anyone. Every spring, my dad would come home from the pasture completely stunned. A female sheep had given birth in the night, and lo and behold, he would find the lambs there in the morning. I knew that was going to happen days ago. It was easy to tell if you just got quiet and paid attention, which is what I was doing most of the time.

I also think because I'm so quiet and like to keep by myself, people assumed I couldn't hear what they were saying, which meant that I knew everything that was going on in our small town, everything. I had heard the elders talk about this John the Baptist guy who had been stirring things up, talking about a new kingdom, which was gaining quite the following. After all, people were getting fed up, the taxes, the oppression, things were hard. We could use a new kingdom. But I didn't think much of it, this John the Baptist guy, because there was always someone who was claiming to be a prophet like we had back in the old days.

That is until I heard some of the older boys were going out to see him. I heard them talking about this in the pasture. John the Baptist was coming to the river, which was a good half day's hike up hills and over rocks. They had been saving bread and water for the journey and leaving in the morning. I lied in bed all night and I couldn't stop thinking about it. Nothing ever happened in this village, and this was exciting. A prophet? I couldn't just stay back. Besides, no one would miss me. They'd figure I was off in the trees again.

At the first sign of light, I heard my father set out for the pasture, and while my mom and Deborah were still sleeping, I followed behind until I saw the boys leave for the river. Certainly, my legs were shorter than the older boys, but I was quick, all of those sprints home to try and make it back before the sun finally shrunk behind the horizon. If I wasn't trying to hide the whole time, I would've beat them there. Eventually we found more people on their way to see this prophet in the wilderness,

and there became a big enough crowd that I didn't need to hide anymore.

When we got to the river, there was even more people there, most of whom I'd never seen before, but some I had, like some of the tax collectors who came to our village. I recognized them because they always caused such a commotion between the men. My dad said it couldn't possibly be right with how much money they took, but there wasn't anyone to complain to, so he shut up and paid up. People were all rushing towards the riverbank, probably because they were thirsty, but also because the prophet was down there, so I slithered my way through the crowd. People thought I was looking for my parents, so they let me go by. And that's when I saw him, the prophet, John.

Now, I knew prophets were different, but this fellow was unhinged, looked like he hadn't had a proper meal in weeks, sunburned, hair down his back, and I could smell him from the side of the river. I didn't know if he was like this because he wanted to be, or because God told him to be, or because he just didn't have any soap, but people were lining up one by one to be dunked in this river with him. I listened for a long time to John preach, or yell, really, about the most obscure and seemingly tangential things, a brood of vipers, sharing coats, winnowing forks, stones, axes, trees, Abraham, fire, baptism, wages. The list went on and lots of people seemed perplexed about what he was talking, but if you paid attention and listened closely, he was talking about something that was coming and telling us to get ready for it.

As I was listening to him, he looked at me and it was like the truth in him saw the truth in me, like we were both inside and outside of time together. I wanted to be a part of it, part of this next chapter. I knew the water in the river was just water, but today it felt like it held a promise that new life was possible and I wanted to be a part of that. I inched closer. The smell got worse and worse with every step, but I was going, I was going to be baptized by the prophet. And down I went, plunged into the cold water and sent back to the riverbank. It must have been only a few seconds, but it felt like an

eternity, like time had stopped just for this. In that moment, all I could feel was pure joy. If I had a tambourine, like my namesake, I would've played it.

I watched a while longer and you wouldn't believe that even these tax collectors were going in, were promising to start living differently. I looked at the sun and I'd have to get a move on if I wanted to get home before my mother sent people looking. So I climbed up the side of the riverbank and found the path home. I had made sure to leave little signs for myself so I could find my way back, a pile of rocks along the right path, a jumble of sticks where I needed to take a turn. The sun was sinking quickly, and I was running like my life depended on it. In a way it did. I did not want to find out what would happen if the people in my village found out I went by myself to see the prophet. Soon I saw the lights of the village, the candles being set in the windowsills as night fell, the men walking home from the pasture, and as I got closer, I could smell supper.

I came home that night, and no one asked where I had been. My hair was still a little damp from the sweat and the river, but no one noticed. Deborah was playing by my mother's feet like she always was. My father was chattering on like he always was. The smell of bread filled the house. Nothing was different, and yet nothing was the same. The light that my mother had set in the window, I could swear it was brighter.

You might think this is a story that could only be told by a 10-year-old girl's imagination. After all, I was from the middle of nowhere and no one expected much from the girl who preferred the company of fruit trees to people. Maybe this John the Baptist guy was just a fluke who needed a shower and some food, but this is my story, and even if I can't tell you exactly what happened in that river with the smelly prophet, I know something happened. It was like I knew the melody, but in the water, I heard it rhyme. Amen.