

Undivided Attention

May I have your attention... That's one way to quiet a chattering crowd and ask for people to focus. There are all sorts of ways to get people's attention, or to try. Some of you have an enviable whistle. A favorite character from my daughter's childhood, Junie B. Jones, often tells the reader that her teacher claps her loud hands. *Let us pray* works, too. Like I said, lots of options, some are more effective than others. Maybe the people in charge of coming up with what to say on those breaking news banners should take a cue from John the Baptist. "Brood of vipers" seems to be a fairly persuasive way of grabbing people's attention. And, as journalist Chris Hayes recently noted that "Our attention is a wildly valuable resource."¹ Everyone and everything it seems wants to grab our attention. Pop up ads on our computer screens, reels on Instagram, clickbait after clickbait, sound bite after sound bite, and yes, those insistent "breaking news" banners at the bottom of our television screens are all well-planned and well-financed ways of grasping at our very valuable attention. And if they do their job correctly, they manage to hold our attention for at least a bit, to hook us somehow. Holding our attention is not any easier than grabbing it because of all the other insistent, competing voices and interruptions coming at us in every moment. Like Dug the dog in the movie *Up*, our attention only holds until the next squirrel crosses our path.

John seems to sense the people's easily distracted ways when he bluntly addresses his listeners with the words ever preacher worth her salt loves to read and maybe even ham up a

¹ Chris Hayes, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/03/opinion/chris-hayes-msnbc-attention.html>

bit when it comes our way, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”² “What got your attention?” John wonders aloud. *What brings you out here, away from your everyday lives?* John has their attention even before they hear him preach. People from every walk of life step away from their jobs and families to hear what this man has to say—even tax collectors and soldiers, Luke says. And when we listen to the content of John’s message, he is not promising a beachside condo or a new car. Quite the opposite. He throws around words like *repentance* and *axes* and *fire*. He condemns complacency about family ties and tells them that their lives are intended to look different in light of their changed hearts. That’s how the Common English Bible translates *repentance*, by the way. The Greek word for *repentance* points to turning, changing direction, taking a different path. The word is that transparent, that straightforward. Recognizing how some of our Christian siblings have wielded the word *repent* as a weapon, the translators who compiled the CEB chose to use another phrase: “Produce fruit that shows you have *changed your hearts and lives*.”³ Repentance is not simply a head thing or simply a heart thing; it is not merely about words, nor is it merely about actions; it is a whole-life thing. Repentance is also a *life-long* practice. We can’t simply turn once. There are too many temptations, too many tugs, too many squirrels. So, as one of you noted in bible study this past week, it can feel a bit like we’re going in circles, turning and turning and turning some more. And still, in response to the grace of God, we are always invited to turn back to the way of goodness and grace, no matter how turned around we may be.

² Luke 3: 7, NRSVue

³ Luke 3:8, CEB

We don't know why so many people pour into the wilderness to hear what John has to say. Some may come for the spectacle, curious about this wild man raving in a wild place. The vast majority seem to be captivated by the message John offers. No, it is not slick or savvy; it is however honest. They live in a region occupied by a foreign power and in an age when tetrarchs and high priests bow to the whims of an emperor who crowns himself as the Son of God. This pretend deity shows no interest in the least of these; any roads he builds are for the movement of his commerce and his war horses. John points to another One, another way, a better way. In the deafening din of imperial propaganda, something about John's message grabs the people's attention. The people—including the tax collectors and Rome's own soldiers—hunger for a different way of living, for a richer life than the empire can offer. They hear *good* news in John's fiery words. And they want to know how they can be a part of this new world: What then should we do? How do we make our changed hearts and lives visible? How do we demonstrate that our lives have been turned around? John does not tell them to buy a specific bumper sticker or post one particular thing on Facebook. He tells them to be generous neighbors and decent human beings: Share your extra coat and your food. Do your job well and fairly. Accept that enough is actually enough. Don't use your power to trample others.

John's words lead some to wonder if he is in fact the One they have been looking for. I hadn't noticed before that John tells them to live turned around lives before he mentions that the true Messiah is coming. Bearing fruit is not about cleaning up their acts to impress or even please Jesus. Jesus is coming and will baptize them with the Holy Spirit giving them power and insight and hope unlike anything they have known, and the time to embrace and embody a new way of living is here. John is not simply a warmup act for Jesus. He is not a holy shock jock,

seeking to frighten or berate or make a spectacle simply to grab their attention for his own glory. John is making a way in the wilderness, drawing the curious, the hungry, the weary, the lost, and the forgotten to the One who is coming, the One who in fact is baptized right along with them. Jesus is not interested in making a big entrance or filling stadiums. He is not concerned with having his face on a coin or trouncing anyone who stands in his way. No, this Ruler comes to offer peace, justice, love, and mercy, to pay attention to the lost and the least and the overlooked, and to call forth a new community that does the same. Jesus wants our attention, because he wants what is good and holy for us *and* for the world through us. Jesus comes to save us—and everyone else—from anything and anyone that would separate us from God and from one another, to save us from any and all who are determined to trample us and toss us aside when we no longer warrant their attention.

Fires and weather and a state funeral for a president understandably grabbed our attention this past week, much as hurricanes and floods did in the fall. And yet the steady stream of recovery, making sure people have a coat or a trailer or a heater or a bag of groceries no longer grabs headlines because it is no longer breaking news. It is good news though, holy, saving, honest-to-God gospel good news. It is warmth, it is nourishment, it is compassion, it is kindness, all fruit of a repented and rightfully attentive life. This turned life follows not the latest fad or the loudest outrage, but a different way, a way that is more concerned with the welfare of others than with making a name for oneself. This work and witness reflects a turned around, turned out life. It's not about grabbing attention; it is instead about being attentive to the things and the people who have God's attention.

In a few moments we will reaffirm the promises made at our baptism, answering the questions we ask every new member when they join, including every confirmand:

Question 1: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you **turn from** the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Question 2: Do you **turn to** Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?

And question 3: Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his word and **showing** his love?

In response to the grace of God poured out in Jesus Christ—grace always comes first—we are asked to turn, to change course, to give our attention to Christ and all we are called to be and do in his name. And God knows there is an abundance of squirrels, an overwhelming number of things and voices and demands vying and fighting to get and hold our oh-so-precious and oh-so-fickle attention. So the call comes again and again and again, as often as we might need it. This call meets us in every desert and at every crossroads urging us to turn back to the good, gospel way and to live a life that demonstrates what it means to be loved and claimed by Jesus. He is the One who gives up every last bit of power and glory to be born and baptized among us, not to get the world's glory or even hold its full attention but to save that world, baffling and battered as it may be.

It is easy—or easier—for me to pay attention to Jesus and all that he wants for us while I'm in here. It's not always easy out there. I can use regular reminders, something I can cling to as I make my way through God's embattled and beloved world. The font may have caught your attention this morning with ribbons spilling out like water in a desert. As we leave this morning,

we will have the chance to take a snippet of blue ribbon with us as we go, a symbol of that overflowing fountain of grace that washes over us and ties us to the One who calls us to turn and follow him in the way of life.

It is my hope that these ribbons will remind us of the promises made at our baptism, the same promises we renew here today. When our attention wanders and our steps begin to falter, may the ribbons remind us to turn again and again and again and again, to turn away from all that does not and cannot save us and to turn toward this One who does, the only One who truly can. And may these ribbons remind us to share and show with our very lives what it means to follow this One. Jesus is not simply seeking our attention; he is seeking us. He is ever-attentive, always turning toward the world in love, asking us to live turned-around lives overflowing with love, courage, justice, and compassion in his name. He is calling us even now to do our faithful best to give him our undivided attention.

After all, we have his.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.