

When the slaves sang “Steal Away,” they had in mind getting to Jesus, to the warm, embracing love of his care. But, like all oppressed peoples, the slaves knew that religious talk is always inescapably public, political talk.

“Stealing Away” was never just a pious hope for communion; it was also a resolve to escape the harsh exploitation of slavery. It was an intention to get to a new region governed by justice, dignity, and freedom. They imagined this other governance to be a version of the kingdom of God.

This journey to “Jesus,” that is, to the land of freedom and well-being, was indeed hazardous, but they were prepared to sing it and to travel it. Along the way there were many ominous checkpoints before crossing the Ohio River, which symbolized the border into the land of hoped-for freedom.

There was another crossing like that, the most famous crossing between East Berlin and West Berlin, the alleged entry into the freedom and well-being of “the West.” It was “Checkpoint Charlie,” operated on the Eastern side by rude, ominous border guards, sniffing dogs, and mirrors under cars.

As we prepare for Christmas, imagining we will “Steal Away to Jesus,” the sweet-smelling baby, and away from all that is hazardous to our health, it is easy to forget the primal truth of Advent: we cannot get to the sweet-smelling Jesus of Christmas without passing through “Checkpoint John.”

This text (Matthew 3:1-12) is about the conversation at Checkpoint John. As is characteristic at such checkpoints, John does all the talking. We never get to speak, even to make a self-defense. We only listen to his speech. We are not accustomed to being addressed in this harsh way.

John is dressed in counter-culture clothes, lives close to the street, eats by foraging. His demeanor is not unlike those border patrol people at Checkpoint Charlie—rude, deliberately intimidating, mostly silent and glaring.

His message matches his appearance and demeanor. He invites his listeners to renounce collusion with Rome. This entry point of baptism requires a deep either-or: it is either lost or found, dead or alive, slave or free, accommodating or obedient. Which will it be?

We imagine John wants to know our credentials and our justification for entry. We begin to tell him of our daddy and our daddy’s daddy, the one who fought in the war, and served the flag, and paid his taxes on time. We trace our genealogy all the way back to father Abraham. Surely, as accustomed to privileged access as we are, that will entitle us to entry.

John takes all our credentials, our diplomas and resume, our passport and Amex cards and all the rest . . . and tears them up! Not interested. To gain entry into the land of freedom, old inherited virtues and privileges and accomplishments do not count. It dawns on us slowly that admission is neither easy nor automatic.

If you want to “Steal Away to Jesus,” if you want to be free, change your ways, demands John. John’s command to act differently turns into a threat: *Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Now this utterance may be only a rhetorical eruption of a prophet bewildered by the intransigence of his audience. Nonetheless, what it indicates is that John’s listeners have to show evidence of changed behavior before they are evaluated for entry. The Jews freed from slavery in Egypt, spent forty years wandering in the wilderness, learning the disciplines of freedom, before they could enter the promised land.

The work of freedom begins in the old regime marked by oppression, exploitation, and greed. These old ways of being cannot produce the humanness for which we yearn. We walk cautiously up to the checkpoint, but we also go there hoping to get our lives in order and our common life ordered for well-being.

Stealing away *to* Jesus means moving away *from* rage to respect for our neighbor, away from self-hatred to self-respect, away from strife, jealousy, anger, greed, and all the rest, to love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Checkpoint John reminds us that we could be different and the world could be different. But leaving what enslaves us and stealing away to the new requires transformation. Advent is about bearing the fruits of repentance that gain us entry into the land of freedom.

(This sermon is a “riff” on a sermon by Walter Brueggemann.)