

This weekend marks the 61-year anniversary of the premiere of the stop-motion Christmas special, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. What originally began as a short story written by Robert L. May for a Montgomery Ward advertisement was eventually turned into the song we all know and became the inspiration for the Christmas special. But that doesn't mean the story has always been the same. From its inception, the story of Rudolph has been altered and transformed in several ways, but perhaps none as drastic as the addition of "The Island of Misfit Toys". Romeo Muller came up with the idea of a place where toys who didn't fit in would be loved and cared for. And of course, it is the so-called "misfits" who end up saving the day.

I think it's pretty easy to see that John the Baptist would have qualified as a bit of a misfit. I mean, from the Biblical account, we can gather that he's a bit different. But it's also clear that John does not fit in with what we would call the religious establishment. Nor does he want to be. John is in the Judean wilderness, which extends out as far as 20 miles from Jerusalem, but is as near as the outskirts of the city itself. Which means that John would have had pretty easy access to the temple, and yet, that's not where he carries out his ministry. It's clear that John has some issues with the institutional religion of his time. Because he's a misfit.

Now I have to say, every time I read this passage, I've been drawn to John's response to the Pharisees and Sadducees. I mean, they are the target of much of John's speech in this text. But I admit that I've tended to gloss over the beginning of this text, leading me to miss something important. Matthew writes, "Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to John." First of all, that's a lot of people. But what's more is I'm struck by the fact that all these people are venturing out into the wilderness to see an oddball like John, when the temple, which was the center for religious practice and worship and even social life, was right there in Jerusalem. I just never recognized how popular John was with the people.

Something about John – his message, his spiritual practice – resonates with a lot of people. Something draws them away from the convenience and predictability of the temple, and out into the wilderness to this wild preacher. Doesn't that strike you as odd? Except that something about John connects with the people in a way the established religious body of the time does not. Something about him sparks a sense of possibility – of hope and transformation. Something about John speaks to the hearts of a lot of people. Something about John feels like good news to misfits.

You see, at this time, there was already some significant distrust and dissatisfaction with the way religious and spiritual practice was happening at the temple in Jerusalem. Groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees had reduced faith to the adherence of a strict set of rules, the chief priests and scribes appeared to the people to be mere pawns for the oppressive Roman state, and there seemed to be very little that was inspiring people to believe

in a God who was near to them, let alone cared much about them. And so groups like the Essenes, of which one such community near Qumran would later produce the famed Dead Sea Scrolls, offered a different way of practicing faith in everyday life. The Essenes were basically the ancient version of an island of misfit toys.

While we don't know if John was a part of one such community or not, it seems clear that he was inspired by the practice of getting out of the shadows of temple leadership with the purpose of seeking a deeper connection with God. And it seems that he was not alone in that. There were others who also wanted something different, too. And I suspect it has to do with John's message in the wilderness.

Now, we all know that John's big thing is repentance. And repentance means to turn around, change direction, or choose a different path. And by no means am I lessening that message – we could all use a reminder to repent and seek the ways of God in our lives. But I think the thing that spoke to the people, the thing that connected with these band of misfits the most was the promise that "the Kingdom of Heaven is near." I mean, Can you just imagine the hope that such a promise would instill in people who had begun to lose hope in their religious institutions? Because if the Kingdom of Heaven is near, then so is the one who rules that Kingdom. And that means change is possible. Transformation is on the horizon. Newness of life is within our grasp. And the love of God is on the brink of busting fully into the world.

And maybe that's why the misfits come. Because misfits know what it feels like to be overlooked or underestimated. Misfits know what longing feels like. And the promise that God is near, even and especially to the misfits of the world, leads us onto a path of newness and transformation. Because if we're honest with ourselves, we're all misfits. Deep down, we know we're not perfect, we know we're not the ones who have it all together. We're the ones who know we need God's grace. And the good news John proclaims is for misfits like you and me.

My friends in Christ, the Kingdom is near. And it's a Kingdom for people who don't fit the mold, who hope against hope in the promise that God is transforming the world, who know that even now, God is doing a new thing in this time and place, if only we have eyes to perceive it and hearts open to the possibilities God has in store for us and this world. It's a Kingdom for all who long for a place to call home, a Kingdom for those who have ever believed that there could be more to this life than just what is right now, a Kingdom for misfits, who know deep within that we are not misfits to God, but are beloved beyond measure, even if the world cannot see it. The Kingdom of Heaven – the reality of God among us and with us is ever so close. So, if you've ever felt out of place – a misfit, even – there is a place for you here in the family of God. Shine your light into the wilderness, for all the other misfits to see and know the nearness of Christ's love. Amen.