

## **The Squint System**

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If you have been following local news lately you know that there is a Boston City Councilor who wants to hold hearings over the next few months, which would inform Boston cab riders that they are entitled to certain things, certain rights, when they get into a taxi cab. These rules already exist. The City Councilor simply wants to make sure that that they are posted in each and every cab in our city, as they are in many other major cities, so that whether you are a Boston resident or visiting from Seattle or Singapore, you will this information right in front of you.

The Taxi Rider Bill of Rights consists of 10 rules and they are pretty straightforward and reasonable stuff. They include being able to take your preferred route, to receive a printed receipt for all metered rides, to have a courteous, trained professional driver who knows and obeys all the traffic laws - though some claim this one to be unfair in Boston because no one obeys the traffic laws! To request that the driver not talk on a cellphone while driving, be familiar with the streets of Boston, and finally to have windows, heat and air-conditioning that work are also included.

Now I could regale you with my tales of good and not-so-good cab experiences in the city of Boston. I could tell you about the lovely drivers with whom I have had pleasant exchanges and who have provided safe and helpful service. I could also tell you about the drivers who sighed loudly because they did not think I was a good enough fare as the trip as too short, or who talked loudly on their phone the whole time, or who ran red lights. Many of them. I have been yelled at for getting into cabs at the end of the line and yelled at for getting in cabs in the front of the line. If I am taking a cab home, the giveaway on whether or not the trip will be good is if they cannot find the landmark nearest my building which is Cheers. My friends, it is a very sad day indeed when a cab driver in Boston cannot find Cheers!

A few years ago, an article entitled "Hub's Cab Service Humbled by NYC's" appeared in the newspaper (*The Boston Herald, Thomas Keane, Feb 11, 2000*). It compared taxi service in New York to the taxi service in Boston. And guess what? New York won hands down. Among the numerous reasons listed was this - that in New York every cab has a light on its roof and depending on how it is illuminated you can tell at a distance whether it is available, in use, or not in service. In Boston we use a much simpler technology: the squint system. According to the author here is how it works. If a cab is coming down the street, squint and look real closely. Do you see what appears to be a body in the back? If so, it is probably a passenger. That means the cab is unavailable.

In many ways I think we squint our way through the season of Advent as we look at what is coming down the road at us. The squint system might indeed be the very method of Christians throughout time, including the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist. We look in the distance for something recognizable; we squint and look closely and sometimes it passes us right by. This

new season of Advent is worth our pausing for, as we begin a new liturgical year in which we will hear, week by week, Mark's understanding of the Christian life.

The Gospel of Mark begins not with the genealogy of Jesus, or the story of the annunciation to the Mary but rather it begins by recounting these words of the prophet Isaiah, "see I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." There is indeed urgency to this message in getting the good news, the gospel, out into the very world for which the savior came in the first place. Mark in fact reaches back to the very words of the prophet Isaiah at the beginning of his Gospel to make clear, perhaps, that what he is to tell will link forever Jesus Christ the Son of God as the one for whom he prepared, and Isaiah prepared and, in fact, the one for whom we prepare even to this day.

That John the Baptist called for repentance and was followed by people from the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem is important, it seems, for two things. First, that repentance has always been a benchmark for people of faith and second that Jesus does not ask us to do anything or go anywhere where he has not led the way.

Repentance. Let's think about repentance. It is not a word in our daily lexicon. It is definitely a church word; a word weighted with duty and responsibility. It is not a word that makes us feel good, not compatible with the power of positive thinking that permeates our society. But repentance is at the heart of what we hear from Isaiah and Mark this day. Repentance is an acknowledgement of our failings and an active willingness to realign our lives. Repentance is the precursor to forgiveness which we often want to skip right over. But here we are reminded again of our own shortcomings, our own failings, and our own inability to save ourselves. We need to repent, and some of us often, for the ways in which miss both hearing and living the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Leading the way. One of the most frequently asked questions in baptism preparation with parents and godparents is this, "If Jesus is the Son of God, why did he have to be baptized?" I think the real answer is that he didn't. Jesus did not need to be baptized to be the Son of God, or to engage in his earthly ministry or to die and rise again. But Jesus chose to be baptized, as was the custom for faithful Jews at that time. Jesus did not become a Christian at his baptism. He was born and lived and died as a faithful Jew. That may come as news to some of you. So if he did not get baptized for the reasons we do, then why did he do it at all? Because he understood the need for repentance, for realigning and recommitting lives, our own and those around us, even in the midst of living them.

When we prepare infants and their families each month for baptism, we are clear that this is a significant milestone in their lives and in this community of faith. We baptize because Jesus told us to and because he himself was by John the Baptist. In other words we do what Jesus said and did. We follow his lead. We do not baptize because it is the socially appropriate thing to do or because it could make God love the child (or adult) anymore. All of us, by virtue of our creation and birth are children of God. Baptism marks us as Christ's own forever and grafts us to the life of the Christian community. It comes with responsibilities and challenges, but also deep and profound joys. It means that we spend our lives preparing the way for the one who is to come, on the lookout for him, squinting into the distance together.

We break bread and drink the cup for the very same reasons . Jesus both did it and commanded us to do the same in remembrance of him.

If the message of John the Baptist invites us to repent and the season of Advent invites us to anticipate and the world around us encourages us to consume, is it any wonder that this is a wonderfully complicated time of year? When you squint and look closely, what do you see in the distance?

So back to the Taxi Rider Bill of Rights. You will recall that one of them was to be able to take your preferred route. It seems to me that the very point of Advent might be to take a new route, a harder route, the long way home. The very point is to say that our preferred route might not be the route that will draw us closer to the heart of God and to the savior of the world. If we squint and look closely we will see the God who loved us, each and every one of us. Loved us so that messengers were sent to prepare the way until finally God's son, the Savior, the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit came among us and we were never again the same.

Amen.