

December 9, 2007

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

“Things Will Be Different Now”

Rev. Mary Robinson-Mohrs

Now here we were having such a nice Advent, and somebody let John the Baptizer into our party! We're having our celebrations, and the tree is up and the flowers and wreaths and candles are up, looking absolutely beautiful and lifting our spirits. We have wonderful music and fairs and times for worship, and our musicians and cooks and craftspeople and all our “behind the scenes” people (you know, the people who vacuum and dust so that things sparkle, or run sound systems, or hand out bulletins, or fold bulletins and so forth) have worked long and hard to bring their special touch to our celebrations. Now John comes crashing into our celebration, with his Mr. Caveman look that is supposed to remind us of the great prophet Elijah, and with all of his weird ascetic diets and ways of the deserts.

And he is so blunt and straightforward! No finesse or polite correctness! Why, when he was preaching, some of the finest religious leaders took their valuable time to come and hear him firsthand, and he called them a bunch of snakes! He yelled at them quite a bit, telling them they had been hiding behind the rock of Abraham's legacy, and then railed at them about needing to get their act together and change their ways for good.

I had hoped we could glide from the happiness of Thanksgiving right into the joy of Christmas, and avoid this loud demanding voice that speaks of axes and fire and winnowing forks and judgment and repentance. I mean, that's what all the stores around us are doing. I don't recall seeing any kind of display out at the mall with Wildman John chasing after properly dressed people with a pitchfork in one hand and a torch in the other.

But then Advent is a time to ponder the many facets of the great celebration of Christmas that is still yet to come. What does it mean that God has reached out to us to walk alongside of us? How are we different as the people who follow the living Jesus Christ here on earth, and how is the earth different because of Christ dwelling in our midst?

Perhaps it is good to have a sobering prophet intrude upon our celebration, lest we be blinded by its brightness and seduced into thinking that Jesus is just for our happy times. Perhaps John's call for repentance is the foundation that brings amazing and true joy to our rejoicing.

Michael Turner ponders the way John shakes us and wakes us out of our complacency as he reflects upon how John might have come across in the small church of his childhood. He says,

“We were the kind of church that liked our religion in small, controlled doses. Nothing fanatical. We were perfectly happy for God never to say anything to us other than what we expected to hear already, and what we expected to hear was ‘I’m okay. You’re okay.’ ‘God is nice; therefore, we should be nice to each other.’ So if John had pulled up (and) stepped into the pulpit and unleashed one of his fire-breathing, spit flying sermons, that would have been the end of him.” (*Michael A. Turner in “Pulpit Resource,” October November December 2007 issue, page 50*).

John may be a little hard to take, and he may rattle our sensibilities, but he helps us to recognize and receive Jesus in a way we might not otherwise do. Advent is a time to ponder our daily decisions and how our lives are or are not in sync with the rule of God. Advent brings the winds of the Spirit and the winds of change that allow us to receive the new baby Jesus who is the ruler of all and the Prince of Peace. It allows us to rejoice in a new kind of obedience to God which brings about new attitudes and new actions which reflect care and concern of neighbor. John demands that we set aside our life-draining ways and change – that’s what it means to “repent” – so that we might reflect to the world around us the rule of the coming One, Jesus Christ.

In many ways, John isn’t saying anything new. He’s mostly addressing the “righteous ones,” the people of Israel who felt they were permanently in God’s good graces because of their heritage. When John would preach about the horrible end of the unrepentant and unbelieving people of the world, they would clap and say, “Right on!” as they looked around the crowd at all those “other” people. But John points right at them, and says to them specifically that he means THEM! They can’t depend upon pedigree alone. It doesn’t matter if you have ten Presbyterian pastors in your lineage. If you aren’t living as if your very core has been transformed by God, then you have missed the boat entirely, friend. John takes the words and the energy of the prophets before him, and points this tradition squarely at the people who say, “Oh, all that stuff isn’t for us; it’s for those other losers.”

What does the world look like, then, if it is transformed by God? Isaiah gives us a wonderful picture of the transformation that comes from true change. Natural enemies will live without fear of one another, and will nurture one another. Fear can bring out the horrendous side of humanity, you know. Fear of those who are different can turn a crowd into a violent and murderous mob. Fear murdered 6 million Jewish persons just a few decades ago. Fear slaughtered entire tribes of Native Americans not too long before that. Fear is what drives the current state of Israel to crush down Palestinian people, and fear left Matthew Shepherd, a nineteen year old gay man, to die on a fence on a cold winter night in Wyoming. Fear of terror is sending our own nation on a dangerous and often irrational course of reaction toward all Arab or even Arab appearing persons. Just ask any Mexican-American about that!

It is hard work to bring about change that can eliminate fear. It is hard work to open oneself to those who might bring harm. It is hard work to try to develop new ways of understanding, to lose mistrust and replace it with trust over time. It is hard work to say,

“I want to trust you, but here is my concern about you. How can we work together to change this?” It is even harder work to bring about the changes needed to transform our world into the world that God foresees.

In his autobiography, Gandhi speaks of his life as an “experiment with the truth.” Early in his life, he was thrown off a train in South Africa, and in that experience he learned an important lesson that stayed with him throughout his life. It was soon after he had earned his law degree in England. He was traveling by train to South Africa to practice law. When he boarded the train in South Africa, he was told that because he was “colored,” he could not sit with white people in first class on the train. Gandhi had in his pocket a letter from the Queen that certified that he was an attorney. “Attorneys can’t be colored in South Africa,” the angry train conductor retorted. Gandhi clung to his seat, and even when he was beaten, he refused to move. He clung also to the truth that he knew about himself. For the rest of his life, Gandhi operated on the premise that truth will always win out over lies. His whole life became an “experiment with the truth.” In other words, he was always testing the questions, “Can truth make its own way in the world? Is truth more powerful than falsehood? Can confrontation with the truth change lives?”

Enemies of the truth can beat you, can even take your life, but they cannot defeat the truth. The truth is always more powerful than its enemies. That is what Gandhi taught his followers, and when he worked with millions of his fellow Indians, he led the movement that liberated India and won a country its independence, leading to the largest democracy in the world. His “experiment with the truth” worked.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was heavily influenced by Gandhi’s work. He immediately saw its relevance to the evils of racial segregation in America. King knew the truth, that God has created all people equal and that it is evil to treat people otherwise. He became convinced that ordinary people, clinging only to the truth, defending the truth in a nonviolent way, can move the world. And truth does not need violence, for the way of truth never needs violence to establish itself.

Some people might say to themselves, “Well, ‘truth’ isn’t all there is to Christianity.” I am thankful to Karl Barth, the great theologian of our time, who said, “All truth is God’s truth.” In other words, if you are pursuing something that is true, God is inspiring it into being.

Isaiah’s words are overflowing with hope for us. Sometimes our world seems pretty hopeless when it comes to living truthfully and without destructive fear. But Isaiah sees a stump, the only remains of what was once a large and beautiful fruitful tree that has been killed. We have so many stumps in the woods around us that testify to amazing old growth forests, so we know about stumps. But we also know that stumps are not the trees that once stood where the silent and rotting stump now sits.

However, Isaiah says there is a shoot growing out of this stump. There is still a life force in this stump! In other words, God is still at work in our world! God has not given

up on humanity! God is sending us someone who will be wise and righteous. This is not one who will be guided by bribery or propaganda or the current polls. This is one who will bring a rule that looks out for the poor and the meek. This is one that will bring the world to a place where fear and violence are no more, swept away by the wind and the power of the Spirit.

Reinhold Neibuhr inspired many people when he used to say, "If you want peace, work for justice." That's part of what John is saying when he demands that we repent, that we change our ways to be like God's ways. John says there will be consequences for our actions. No more will the only commandment on earth be, "Thou shalt not get caught." People are going to get caught. This is frightening. But the alternative is even more frightening. Child molesters and predatory persons and purveyors of violence, racism, sexism, and homophobia would never be caught or held accountable for their reign of terror otherwise. So John declares, whether we are ready to hear it or not, that God cares about how we treat each other and demands accountability. The world is not amoral after all, and it is not haphazard. The world will be ordered, so that the fragile and the vulnerable can have their say and live their lives.

The stump of despair that is our world has a new shoot of life coming forth at God's initiative. It is going to be the reign of a great ruler, who will bring different ways of living to our world. Thanks be to God, it is Jesus Christ!

Now, how shall we ready ourselves for the reign of Jesus Christ? He is coming. Are you ready to be his citizen? Amen.