

Advent 3C, December 13, 2009

Lections: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

This Sunday is Gaudete Sunday, a point in Advent where our preparations are marked by joy. Back in the day when Advent was a little Lent and the candles were purple, today's candle would be pink. We could concentrate on Paul's message of rejoicing.

But at least at first glance we might wonder if the gospel causes that rejoicing. We see John the Baptist and hear the famous Brood of Vipers speech. He and the other prophetic voices are strong stuff pressing a master reset button for our consciousness. We listen and wonder if we are preparing for Christmas or for the incarnation, for the spirit of God to visit us enfleshed in Jesus - which are not the same.

In the movie, Talledega Nights, we hear a dinner prayer addressed to the Lord Baby Jesus who is just easier to deal with than the grown up one, and easier to mention in prayer than his cousin John. We can't get to the baby Jesus or the grown up Jesus without John - every year we have two weeks of his telling us where we have gone wrong in our approach to the feast by challenging our approach to our lives. Over and over, it seems, we always need to hear what he is telling us.

"The prophets say what no one wants to hear, what no one wants to believe. They point in directions where no one wants to look. They hear God when everyone else has concluded that God is silent, seeing God where no one else does. They feel God's compassion, God's anger, God's joy. They dream God's dreams, hope God's hopes, announce God's future."<sup>1</sup> And so we should pay attention.

People are paying attention to John; they seek him out, the one who dropped out of institutional religion school, who went into the wilderness to get at the core of things. Why would we recognize his challenges as important?

J. Phillip Newell, in his book Christ of the Celts, says that humanity has forgotten itself then and now. John calls all in preparation to release fears and falseness and ignorance and to return to the true nature of creation and the fullness of our relationship in all things. This is the message under what John says. "I do not believe that the gospel which literally means good news is given to us to tell us that we have failed or been fake. That is not news and it is not good. We already know that about ourselves." We know that we have been less than we are called to be. We know we have failed humanity and whole nations throughout the world who are suffering or are subjected to terrible injustices that we could do something about. So today's lesson is not given to tell us what we already know. It is given so that we can be re-membered, in what we have forgotten. Jesus is our memory of God and John helps us remember. "It is when we remember who we are and who all people truly are that we will begin to remember what we should be doing and how we should be relating to one another as individuals, as nations, as an entire earth community."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word

<sup>2</sup> Christ of the Celts

We need to hear John's judgment on our greed, our egoism, our lack of honesty, even on our militarism. He wants us in the Jordan, washed clean of our involvement with those things that keep us from the preparation necessary for the coming One. And then he points to Jesus.

We trust that the One we sing about, the One we pray will come, Immanuel, will ransom our captive souls. We remember a God who turns the world upside down in love and vulnerability. The world waits for the children of God to remember who we are so that we can be agents of grace and turn the world upside down as well. That is the coming of the kingdom, living out the love and justice of God as shown in Jesus. We are called back to our core.

"What should we do?" they ask. And Jesus asks us in John's voice how we handle riches, how we exercise public service, how we live out stewardship. "To prepare for the advent of the Humble Servant we let the divine as cut off our greed, our self indulgence, hypocrisy...and let it be burned away."

My Afghan neighbor appears at my door repeatedly asking me to contribute to his home country's rebuilding. "Oh, yes," I reply, "my parish in Boston sent chickens through Heifer Project to Afghanistan." "Good," he says. "What is your new church doing?"

My own John the Baptist, asking my ethics to move in preparation of my life for the good news.

This is some Advent. We see one of its themes as waiting. I wonder who is waiting:

- For all to have clean drinking water
- For all to have food
- For workers to receive a living and fair wage
- For the rich to share their wealth
- For the caste system to end
- For the baby Jesus to be born

Waiting for what? For the people of God to remember who they are. This is some Advent.

Amen.

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