

Sermon Advent II Year A 2016

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19

Matthew 3:1-12

Bill Watson

December 4, 2016

Advent is one of my favorite church seasons. Not too long, filled with hope and joy. A season of evocative images, metaphors, traditions, and much more. We are looking forward of course to Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus. God's gift to the world.

Advent always begins as it did this year on the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend. Having just experienced Thanksgiving is a particularly good time to begin our Advent journey. Having reflected upon all that we have to be thankful for, this sets the stage as we prepare the way for Jesus. Having reflected, been thankful, our hearts and minds are open to the work we have ahead of us.

Getting ready...

Yet getting ready is not easy since we are already getting ready for so much. We are busy, busy, busy. Such as selecting gifts, decorating, making travel plans, planning for gatherings and parties. We are busy cooking and rehearsing for the pageants, etc. And into this season filled with preparation, John the Baptist breaks in. John, this authentic evangelist, suggests that we need to refocus and to look ahead, but not just to December 25 (just three weeks from this morning). (when I say that do you go, "yikes!")

Advent is always about looking ahead, as we prepare once again to celebrate the birth of Jesus. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." But John is calling us to be ready for the second coming, the return of Jesus at the final judgment. John wants us to not be taken unprepared but to be ready. John is calling us out of our comfort zones.

John the Baptist is the most interesting of prophets who came to “prepare the way of the Lord.” This unusual looking character made his residence in the wilderness, far from the comforts of village and home.

There was certainly nothing in John’s appearance that would have drawn us to him. His description sounds a little like countless homeless people that we have encountered in any major city. He looks like one of the types of people that make us avert our gaze and look the other way.

“John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.” Well, if his description did not attract people something else must have because we are told that people from everywhere were attracted to him. “The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him.”

So if not his appearance was not what attracted them, perhaps it was his message. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Something of John’s authentic message was attractive. It was irresistible, actually. People came from far and wide to hear John. And to be baptized by him in the River Jordan experiencing his baptism of repentance. Something about John’s authenticity brought forth the honest expression of repentance and a desire for forgiveness and amendment of life.

John the Baptist attracted people from all walks of life. As John addressed the crowds, he employed frightening images. John was certainly trying to get their attention. He spoke of a savior who comes with a winnowing fork in his hand. A winnowing fork that will be used to clear the threshing floor, to separate good from bad. John offers an unpleasant and dramatic image of judgment.

While that is one image of judgment and perhaps at times in our lives we have felt that we deserved such judgment, we have to be clear that this vision of John’s is a vision of what the experience of the longed for Messiah might be like. This is John preaching before he encountered Jesus. John’s was a scary and frightening vision, but that vision of a Messiah with a winnowing fork, was not what was experienced in Jesus of Nazareth was it? Jesus came not with a winnowing fork of judgment and exclusion, but with the outstretched arms of

love. Reaching out his arms to welcome all those who like John and even ourselves at times seem so unlikable, so unlovable.

Perhaps you and I hold back from repentance in fear. Fearful of an experience of judgment like the one John suggests. Perhaps not just separated by the winnowing fork but even run through by it. In our darkest night, we fear that that may be what God's judgment has in store for us. Still others of us may fear repentance perhaps because we fear that something about our past cannot be forgiven.

John has these dramatic images of threshing floors. But this is not the picture we have of Jesus. We know the rest of the story. Jesus didn't wield an ax or pitchfork. Instead, he extended his arms in love. Reaching out to others, including, welcoming, healing, feeding, restoring. Salvation thru the gospel of Jesus Christ is offered to all. Advent reminds us though that the decision is ours. In Advent we have to respond. We have to "set our hope on Christ." (as Paul says.) To set our hope on Christ is to realize that we too will one day face judgement. One day we will have to give an account of what we have done with our lives, with all the gifts we have received. How have we used them, accounted for them? Advent is a season that looks ahead to Jesus when he will come again in judgement. Jesus is our hope and expectation. And faith in Jesus comes with hope and expectation as well. Life is a two way street. Jesus has a hope and expectation.

Jesus offers salvation, salvation which he won for us a long ago. So, can we sit back and live a life of ease? No, that is what John is trying to remind us of. The time is now. We must act. Even in the midst of our busyness, of all that we have to accomplish, of all that is expected from us and of us.

John calls us to repentance. To turning our lives around and centering on Jesus.

What does that turning around and centering a life on Jesus look like? As varied as the people gathered here perhaps. For some this is expressed in prayer. Devotional reading perhaps. For others our opportunity occurs through acts of mercy and kindness. In how we greet one another. In how we try to subdue that

judgmental side that wants so easily to look askance at others. Giving the other that parking place close to the store. Leaving the coupon that you decided not to use on the shelf for another. (example while flying last year at the holidays: Starbucks) Paying it forward for someone in line. Coming up with the needed change when someone is short in line. Maybe it is being faithful in saying grace before family meals. Maybe it was taking an angel or bear from the tree and shopping with your children for presents so that someone less fortunate will have gifts as well. Maybe it is committing to serving at Daily Bread or Gateway. Or building handicapped ramps for IOA. Or doing this throughout the year. Salvation Army kettles. Charitable groups, stretching ourselves. And in all we do, doing so with a sense of gratitude and grace and thankfulness. That is the reorienting opportunity of Advent. Maybe it is driving around looking at the lights, etc. and asking children what each signifies. What are the religious symbols and what do they mean? What do the lights represent? What can they represent to us? What are the secular scenes and what do they signify? To see each and every day as filled with opportunity.

What should you do? Be brave, ask God in prayer. And then be observant. You will be surprised at the opportunities that present themselves. And of course then comes the difficult part. Because they will come when you are busy. Involved, engaged, too busy. But the opportunity will be there to turn aside which is the very act of repentance. Of saying, I am sorry Lord to have been so preoccupied.

The good news of God in Christ is that we don't get what we deserve. No threshing floor, no winnowing fork. We get the open arms of Jesus.

Knowing this, we prepare for Christmas during this season of Advent with open arms as well. Open to all whom we encounter. That is God's hope for us in Advent and always. We can make a difference if we are attentive, alert, open, and aware.

Then we can greet the Christ child with joy and peace. Trusting that as we have shown mercy; God will extend mercy to us as well.