

Sunday, December 8, 2019
Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)
Isaiah 11.1-10; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Invitation to Prepare the Way of the Lord”

There’s something I find puzzling, even unsettling, about today’s Gospel reading. No, it’s not crazy old John the Baptist, wearing clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey. It’s not John hanging out in the wilderness of Judea, which was—and still is even today—a pretty desolate place, literally in the middle of nowhere, ranting and raving “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” It’s not even the fact that there were actually people who came out to see what John was all about. That I can actually see, in a weird kind of way. After all, I guess if you happened to live in the middle of nowhere, you had to get your excitement wherever you could find it, even if it was from someone who appears to have gone off his meds. No, what I find unsettling, what I don’t quite get, is the fact that “many Pharisees and Sadducees” were going out to see John, to hear his message of repentance.

The Pharisees were a sect of Jewish religious leaders who had a strict adherence to the Law. And the Sadducees were another Jewish sect, of the upper social and economic levels of Judean society, who held various political, social, and religious roles, including maintaining the Temple in Jerusalem. Both groups were among the social and religious elite of their day. Educated, socially and politically powerful men who, under normal circumstances, wouldn’t be bothered with the likes of John the Baptist. Yet, here they were, turning out in droves to hear his message of repentance. This was not, in and of itself, that odd. Throughout the Gospels, we see the Pharisees particularly, but sometimes the Sadducees, showing up to check on what Jesus was up to. To find ways to put a stop to him. But there was something different about these groups showing up to see someone like John the Baptist, who would have been considered an eccentric and of little or no threat to their authority.

What is particularly odd is that they not only listen to John’s message, they also participate in the baptism he was performing. While there were Jewish rites of purification involving immersion in water—rituals that were required for, among other things, conversion to Judaism—the baptism John performed was something different. It was certainly not something that was sanctioned or even had any particular meaning from the religious perspectives of the Pharisees and Sadducees. So hearing this story always makes we wonder why they showed up. And why they participated in what otherwise appeared to be John’s delusional fantasy.

But there must have been something that drew them in. That attracted them to what John had to offer, even if not part of their own strict religious belief systems. Maybe it has something to do with hope. Something to do with a longed-for change, religiously and societally.

Seven hundred years earlier, the Prophet Isaiah offered an image to the people of Israel at a time when they were under threat from the Assyrian Empire. That one day, Israel would be liberated from foreign oppression. That there would be a new king to rule over the people. And not just that, this king would have the spirit of the Lord upon him, and would usher in a new

age for the people. One in which “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid;” in which “the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.” A kingdom in which “They will not hurt or destroy on all [God’s] holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD” (Is 11.6, 8-9). The image of what has come to be known as the Peaceable Kingdom. A vision of the ideal kingship that, for Christians, will come to fruition through Jesus Christ. But even before Jesus came on the scene, the people of Israel saw this as a foretelling of the new age ushered in by the coming of the Messiah. Whose messiah, or rather, who that messiah would be, is an entirely different question, and would remain the source of dispute between the Jewish authorities and the followers of Jesus.

Nonetheless, there was this prevailing vision, this fervent hope, of what the future would ultimately be like. A hope that was bubbling increasingly close to the surface as Judea faced one oppressor after another—the most recent being the Roman Empire. After generations of occupation and oppression, everyone had had enough. Even the likes of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were responsible for upholding and maintaining the sanctity of the Jewish religious and cultural system, while also having to keep an uneasy peace between the Empire and an increasingly restless populace.

In this political, religious, and cultural quagmire, any seemingly legitimate cause for hope—hope for the fulfillment of the longed-for prophecies—warranted attention. Even by, maybe particularly by, the religious elite. After all, John the Baptist said all the right things. The popular wisdom was that he was directly tied to Isaiah’s prophecy: “This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mt 3.3). He seemed to be the embodiment of the one Isaiah foretold as preparing the way of the One who is to come—the one who would usher in the Peaceable Kingdom. At the very least, John’s ministry was centered on a message of repentance, of turning toward the ideal Isaiah talks about. An urging of all who would listen to reform, to turn back to faithful living so as to help bring about Isaiah’s vision. And after all, despite their hypocrisy, the Pharisees and Sadducees really did want a return to faithful living. They and John were at least in the same book, even if not always on the same page.

Where they were not on the same page was in terms of what was expected regarding living a faithful life. This is obvious from John’s attack of the Pharisees and Sadducees: “‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’” (Mt 3.7-9a). While John was calling for all people to repent—to turn their lives around—the religious elite thought they were exempt. That they were “grandfathered in,” relying on the erroneous assumption that they already had an “in” with God by virtue of being descendants of Abraham and the Patriarchs. John saw that they firmly believed they already knew the whole truth of God’s revelation and were therefore living lives free from blame.

But John warns them that their history, their religious pedigree, is not sufficient. That they need to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” That they need to actually demonstrate their faithfulness not just in word but also in action. Just as everyone else had to do. In his call for repentance, John is calling for a complete reorientation and transformation of life as a means of preparing

for the coming of the Messiah. He warns that nothing less will do. They must change their lives or they will be like a barren tree that is cut down and burned. He foretells that true transformation will come through the baptism that another—that Jesus—would offer. One in which they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. Not a fire of destruction, but the fire of transformation made possible through the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, the Pharisees and the Sadducees did not get the message. This is obvious by what follows in the remainder of the Gospel story. How they continually sought to discredit the message that Jesus preached through his life and ministry. How they ultimately did away with him in a vain attempt to preserve their own misguided way of viewing their relationship with God.

In our annual celebration of Advent, we are given an opportunity to learn from the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We are given the opportunity to break out of the mold of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Like them, we long for the Messiah to come among us and usher in a new age like the one foretold by the Prophet Isaiah. To reform and transform a world not unlike that of Jesus' day. A world that has gone seriously astray from what God intends for his Creation and for his beloved children. We long for a world that is characterized by compassion, justice, fairness, accountability, and peace. But unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, we realize that solely relying on our religious pedigree and claiming to be inheritors of the faith of Abraham—claiming to be Christian—is not enough. As John implores, even commands, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

As Paul wrote to the Romans, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15.7). That in so doing, we may be filled “with all joy and peace in believing, so that [we] abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15.13). That, energized by the Holy Spirit, we may proclaim the Good News that Christ is coming into the world to make all things new. And to begin to show through our own words and actions what that new world can and will look like.

As we continue our journey through Advent, we hear the call of John the Baptist to come, to repent, to turn our lives around, to prepare for the coming of Christ into our midst. We hear in this a message that all is not lost. That there is still hope. So we welcome this call to repentance because, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that our lives need to change. And as we look around us, we see that the ways of this broken and hurting world definitely need to change. And so we are invited to take up John's call, to become voices in the wilderness in which we live, who boldly proclaim: “Prepare the way of the Lord!”