

Sunday, December 4, 2022

Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Isaiah 11.1-10; Romans 15.4-13; Matthew 3.1-12

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1321318461741569>

(Sermon begins at about 16:35)

“Turning Everything Upside Down”

When it comes to the anticipation and preparation for various holidays, most would agree that there is more expectant anticipation for the coming of Christmas than any other holiday. And perhaps more so than any other time of year, our preparations for Christmas and the actual celebration of Christmas itself, are deeply rooted in tradition. While there are certainly specific traditions around such holidays as Easter, Halloween, and Thanksgiving, none tend to be as elaborate as those surrounding Christmas. And none tend to be as sacrosanct. Our preparations include traditions surrounding Advent wreaths, putting out figures for the creche on a prescribed schedule, special Christmas concerts and dinners, and the greening of the church. And God forbid anyone change one single detail of those preparations.

And I’m sure we all have our family traditions. For example, my mother is very particular about how she decorates various rooms of the house. Some things vary from year to year, but some things are always the same. For example, the Christmas tree always must have the old beat-up tin star that my parents purchased for 39 cents at a drugstore for their first Christmas together in 1960. One year, they did purchase a new star to replace the old tattered one. I think it only lasted a few days before ending up in the trash, with the old beat-up star back where it belonged. Mom said, “It’s just not Christmas without that star.” I’m sure you have your own traditions surrounding preparing for and celebrating Christmas that are non-negotiable. And God forbid anyone even suggest changing something. Because it’s just not Christmas without that particular activity, that particular decoration, that particular food item. This is our image of preparation during this season—filled with never-changing traditions.

But where did we get the idea that this season of preparation is about tradition? About always doing things the same as we always have? Because the reality is, the very nature of Advent is about seeking and embracing something new and different. As we talked last week, Advent is about the anticipation of and preparation for the coming of our Lord, both at his birth in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago and at his Second Coming at some unknown and undisclosed time in the future. Both of those things are certainly not ordinary, run-of-the-mill events. The first was God coming among us in the flesh. Never happened before! And the second is the return of the Messiah. Again, something that hasn’t happened before. And when it does, it will never happen again.

We get a sense of something new happening in our readings for today. Just look at our first reading from the Prophet Isaiah. It starts with the image of a shoot from the stump of Jesse. Something new in our midst. And the rest of the passage gives an idea of what is to happen. This will be a time characterized by a call for the return to righteousness—right relationship

with God. This will be a time involving divine judgement. And even more to the point, this will be a time of great upheaval. Of things being turned upside down. Wolves living with lambs? Leopards lying down with baby goats? Calves and lions living together? Cows and bears grazing side-by-side? Children playing among snakes unharmed? A little child becoming our leader? Sounds like crazy talk.

This is a prophecy about a messiah coming into our midst and ushering in a new era. An era in which everything we know, or we thought we knew, will change. Everything we thought to be true will be upended. An era in which “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” When finally, we will see God’s creation as God sees us. With eyes of love and compassion, not with eyes of animosity and fear. When we will see one another as siblings as opposed to viewing each other with suspicion and as potential threats. When we will be given the opportunity to live into a new way of being, where God and his anointed are recognized as our true leaders and we truly begin living according to Divine law as opposed to human law.

Our second reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans similarly uses the image of the root of Jesse. Only now, instead of being an oracle about the coming of a messiah (small M), this reading focuses on the implications of the coming of the Messiah (capital M). The implications of Jesus Christ having come into the world. A similar message to that of Isaiah, promising a new era based on God’s truth, not humanity’s sometimes warped version of truth. A truth that will turn the previously held social order upside down. A truth that will not only be for Jews—previously thought to be God’s Chosen—but also for Gentiles. A truth that will be open and available to all humanity. A truth that will be open and available to all God’s beloved children. Where all will be filled with “joy and peace in believing, so that [all] may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

The first two readings provide us with the vision of what this new reality will be like. What we really are meant to anticipate and prepare for during this time of Advent. A reality that was hinted at in the life and ministry of the One born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. A reality that will be brought into its fullness with his return at the end of the ages.

Our Gospel reading seeks to make the anticipation and preparation for this new reality more personal. That those who seek to follow God prepare for his coming among us by turning our own lives upside down. This is systematically laid out in a story in which virtually every image, every detail, involves a turning upside down of the status quo. Here we have the story of John the Baptist. A figure who, in his time, was countercultural. Living out in the wilderness, away from civilization, wearing strange clothing made of camel’s hair and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey. John was, to say the least, “out there,” figuratively and literally. Figuratively in that he seems to be a bit of a crazed madman living outside the bounds of political, social and religious conventions. And literally “out there” in that he was living in the wilderness, away from the bounds and control, away from the confines and false truths, of the power structures of his day. Away from the Empire’s military and secular control. And away from Jerusalem and the temple’s religious control.

The icing on the cake is what some would consider John’s equally “out there” message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” And, “You brood of vipers! Who warned

you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” And yet, despite the messenger, despite the location, despite the message itself, people flocked from cities and villages, making the effort to get to the wilderness of the Jordan River, just to hear what John had to say and to participate in his baptism of repentance. Which, while normal for us, was a turning upside down of religious practices of the day.

What this tells us is that people of that time were yearning for a change. They were yearning for something more, something deeper in their lives of faith. Something that the Roman Empire and the secular authorities certainly could not provide. And something that even the Jewish religious authorities could not provide. They were looking for something new, something life-changing. Which is precisely what John offered.

It’s hard to imagine a seemingly crazed madman shouting “Repent!” and “You brood of vipers!” appealing to people. Who would want that? But a closer look at what John says actually reveals a message with a very different tone. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Something new and different is on the horizon. Confirmation of what the prophets of old, like Isaiah, had foretold. What they heard, therefore, was a fulfillment of ancient promises. They heard a radically open invitation. One of inclusion and hope. This was their call to action, to be a part of the fulfillment of the long-hoped for coming of the Messiah.

The key was to repent. We think of repentance as an expression of regret or remorse over a wrongdoing. But the Greek word John used was *metanoia*, which has a far deeper meaning than just being remorseful. *Metanoia* is really a process. One of recognizing the need to change and then taking appropriate action. It literally means to change one’s mind, carrying the deeper meaning of also changing one’s heart, of turning around and going in the opposite direction, of making a complete and ongoing reorientation to one’s life.

This is further emphasized in combining the call for repentance with the act of baptism. While the Jews recognized baptism as a sign of repentance, it was an action typically reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. The action was meant to signify a complete and total conversion. A complete and total change in the convert’s way of life. John tells those present, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” In so doing, he is calling on Jews, as the children of Abraham, to undergo conversion, as well. That all are in need of conversion—complete conversion—not just Gentiles. This is a call, in word and in action, for all who follow God to reform and turn back to faithful living. To enter into a new—or renewed—way of life.

John goes on to note that there is one who is coming—the One we know to be the Messiah—who will facilitate this process of repentance. John describes this in an oft misunderstood image of Jesus with “his winnowing fork in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” This is often interpreted as an image of judgement, in which the good—the grain—will be saved and the bad—the chaff—will be burned. But that’s not what he means at all. Again, this is actually an image of inclusivity and hope. The chaff that is separated and burned is not an image for sinners who do not repent and are thus condemned to burn in hell. No, just as the goal of the farmer is to save every grain, the goal of the Messiah is to save every soul. The analogy John is

using is that every kernel of grain is covered in husks, in chaff. The chaff renders the grain useless and therefore must be removed. In this image of grain and chaff, John is actually likening the chaff to that which keeps us from fully being who God calls us to be. Our own doubts and insecurities about ourselves, our anxieties, our self-centeredness, our apathy, our greed. All that stuff that keeps us from being fully present to God and living as God desires for us. As we seek to turn ourselves around and follow the path God calls us to, those things begin to fall away, revealing the fullness who God has created us to be. Allowing us to live more fully into our renewed way of life as God's beloved children.

Our celebration of the season of Advent provides us with an interesting juxtaposition. We recognize that this time of year, perhaps more than any other, is steeped in tradition. In beloved images and rituals that help ground us in our faith. But at the same time, our very lives of faith are not meant to be static and unchanging. This season of Advent, perhaps more than any other, is a reminder that as God's beloved children, we are called to be always on the lookout, always listening for "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" who calls us to repentance, to new and renewed life in the One whose coming we await.