

The Second Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

December 10th, 2006

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Metanoia and the Other
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

You might have noticed that the Episcopal Church was in the news a fair bit this week. Our own bishop led a peace march and Eucharist in San Francisco on Thursday. A few of us from Church of Our Saviour joined over two hundred others, including veterans, Quakers, Buddhists, Muslims, and those who claim no faith tradition at all, in praying for all the dead in Iraq and hoping against hope for an end soon to hostilities there. Out of heartfelt witness for peace, Bishop Marc and his wife, Sheila, joined 11 others in being arrested for civil disobedience.

While we were together outside the Federal Building raising our voices in song, praying, and breaking bread together, I confess I felt uneasy. My brother is in the military at naval flight school. How would he feel, I wondered, about me showing up for a peace protest? And I felt uneasy about the situation – not so much about witnessing for peace in a carefully planned, non-violent demonstration, but for the present circumstances on the ground in Iraq – the same kind of unease I heard in our President's voice this week.

Even as he stood with his staunchest ally in this war, he faced unnerving and difficult questions about how we best handle an end to the occupation without bringing our own people or the Iraqi people to further harm. Whether we were for the invasion or against it, we have now a situation that no longer gives way to sound bytes, dogged insistence, or quick policy fixes. We are all re-learning the painful truth that it is so much easier to unleash the terrifying forces of war than to rein them in again. And the discussions, the recommendations of a special commission, and the heated debates beginning in Congress all happen against a backdrop of abysmal popularity ratings, and a still uncomfortably divided country and international community.

And not even the Episcopal Church is immune from this ongoing divisive discomfort. A week ago yesterday, our brothers and sisters meeting in special convention next door in the Diocese of San Joaquin voted overwhelmingly to take the first step forward in eliminating the Episcopal Church from their constitution and canons. If this decision is confirmed next year, it would mean their Diocese secedes from the Episcopal Church – a possibility we haven't confronted as a community of faith since the Civil War.

And two large parishes in Virginia this past week considered recommendations that they leave The Episcopal Church and joining a North American "Anglican" group under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Nigeria. That's a move that hasn't been seen in over 500 years of history in Anglican tradition, and is largely unknown in 2,000 years of Christian history. From the Archbishop of Canterbury to our newly elected Presiding Bishop to our leadership in this Diocese, the question remains about how best to respond to ultimatums and brazen schismatic

acts, the seeds of division, as some of our sisters and brothers batten down the hatches and shut out communion from those with whom they most disagree.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with the old Chinese curse, "May you live to see interesting times. . ." I suppose these are interesting times in which we live. But also divisive. The "middle," as so many pundits have opined over the past few months, seems to have disappeared, not only in the Episcopal Church, but across the nation and in the world. We live on a divided planet.

Our own sense of unease, of feelings running high, means we take on such issues of war and peace, communion and schism with a great deal of fear and trembling. People are leaving over such things – departing from community. Friends are becoming bitter enemies. Neighbors we thought we knew and loved become hostile and threatening, as we are tempted to hurl abuse at each other across the chasm between us. And we, liberal or conservative, theologically or politically or both, or even if we count ourselves amongst that shrinking and increasingly invisible group of moderates, are tempted to batten down the hatches, count our losses with those who disagree with us most, and shut out anyone and everyone who is different. . .shut out the other.

It's into this divisive context that we hear the words of Isaiah, quoted in today's gospel reading:

*The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*

John the Baptist was out in the wilderness teaching and offering what in the ancient Greek is *baptisma metanoias*: the baptism of metanoia, a term so full of meaning, that it might be better left un-translated. We have often translated metanoia as "repentance," but it implies much more than a turning away from sin. It signifies a change not only of the mind, but of the heart – a complete and utter transformation of what makes us human inside and outside – the remaking of not only our souls, but the remaking of all our relationships with each other, with the earth, and with the God who stands at the center of all being.

In our media-driven age, we might be tempted to chide John a little for going about his business in a most wrong-headed way – for being out in the boonies declaring such a message. Would it not have been better to go to Jerusalem, to the seat of the religious tradition and the heart of Roman power in ancient Palestine. . .to get a better hearing, perhaps even draw over some converts in the higher echelons?

But there is a dangerous assumption in that question. We are caught in a fallacy as a spiritual people look for metanoia in all too familiar places – where we know the situation and the circumstances. . .where we know who's in and who's out of power, and how we are in

relationship with them. In our divisive age, we are often seeking metanoia amongst only those who agree with us the most, amongst those with whom we are most comfortable.

No, John understood something in his bones about where metanoia would most likely occur. And that was on the edge, with a radical encounter with the Other. By “Other” I mean something or someone wholly different from who we are ourselves. . .a different place, a person with whom we radically disagree, or a strange God who comes to us in unexpected ways.

The wilderness was a forsaken place for John’s contemporaries. It’s why he went there to find God and draw others into new relationship. We will also see Jesus, if you stick with us long enough. . .we will see him go to the wilderness for metanoia, for transformation. It’s because out there, in the strangest places of our lives, meeting with the strangest people or even the beasts, where all bets are off, where we are made uneasy and uncomfortable – this is where we find true conversion, true metanoia – a changing of our hearts and minds, and even new eyes to see our own world in unexpected ways.

This Advent, we often gather here, some of us for the first time, some as we have over many years past, for some comfort. . .sometimes for the familiar. But the journey of Advent calls us outside of what makes us comfortable into the edge, into our own wilderness, so that we might encounter with John the metanoia of the soul, where the valleys are lifted up and the mountains laid low. Where our relationships, just in time for Christmas, are remade, and our eyes see the world in a new way. Where our divisions cease and new horizons for the human family become visible.

This Advent, when we are called to busy ourselves with holding up the old and the familiar, when we are tempted into the divisions of a fractious age, take time to go out into the wilderness and seek the transformative presence of the Other. Make time this Advent to get to know a complete stranger, or sit down for coffee with someone who sees the world completely differently than you do. Or head out to a new place you’ve never been before, a new wilderness for you, if only for an afternoon. Or seek an empty place, devoid of all the distractions of the home, the office, and the familiar. Step out of the known and comfortable and invite God in, laying bare all those things that the familiar protects and shields. And be transformed. . .making room for the One who is coming. . .to set us free from division, and sow the seeds of a new community and a new creation, where “all flesh will see the salvation of God.”

Amen.