

The Third Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

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Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Reeds Shaken
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Well, it's that time of year for many of us. I don't know about you, but I am feeling impossibly behind in Christmas preparations. The stress seems to peak just as the days get darkest. Here we are a little over a week away, and all through the town, every creature is stirring, running, shopping, yelling. Our children are generally more irritable. Just yesterday, I witnessed two very public meltdowns of children on the streets of Mill Valley. The parents looked completely overwhelmed, stressed to the max. There is not enough time left, and yet there is so much left to be done. And many of us are called by our vocations, positions of trust, and general good manners to put on a happy face, publicly at least, while things, in the words of a friend, turn "bubbly black" inside.

Yep, it's that time of year. The worst of our family dynamics become almost intolerable. In the Helmer household, discourse devolves too often these latter days into whining, complaining, and sniping. The purchase of the Christmas tree threatens to become a cosmic incident. Just when we are supposed to feel our energy rising, many of us become exhausted and worse than irritable. And the general expectation that we be joyous (while spending money, time, and energy we might or might not have) risks making some of us all the more Scrooge-like:

Bah. Humbug.

In today's Gospel, the stresses are high, too. John the Baptist sends word from prison, and Jesus must have recognized in his cousin and mentor what danger he himself was in: imprisonment was one likely outcome for his challenging the status quo. Execution was also a possibility on the table. The crowds were pressing in, the stress is high, and yet John asks – almost demands – some clarity – this character, John, a crazy wild man who keeps popping up over and over again in this season. He wants to know from Jesus' own lips whether or not it has been worth it. Before the end comes, he wants to know if the ultimate price of total devotion to truth-telling, baptizing, and the God of heaven. . . if all of this and the dangers it has brought are worth it.

And so he sends word to Jesus in today's Gospel – word from prison – his demise apparently understood as inevitable. He wants to know who this Jesus is without a doubt. Is he the Messiah or not?

Jesus' response echoes across time to us, inviting John (and, quite likely, us, too) to decide for ourselves, to turn over in our minds what it means that the blind now see, the lepers walk, the poor hear good news, the deaf are unstopped, and the dead are raised. We are asked to reflect deeply on Someone who only asks that we not take offense – a pretty low requirement, if you think about it for very long!

And then Jesus immediately turns to the crowds with an intensely emotional set of questions, sprinkled with a bit of ironic humor. But like all humor, it is tinged with profound seriousness.

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? Jesus asks them.

What do any of us go out of our way to see, for that matter?

Are we entertained by rising early on a Sunday morning to come to this place; to enjoy the beauty of our liturgy? To see a “reed shaken by the wind?” (as many public figures are.) To see someone “dressed in soft robes?” as we like to dress up and parade around. . .

Jesus’ questions might be a bit humorous, but they are cutting, even for us. What is our motive for showing up to hear prophetic words or engage in a religious community? Is it only to be entertained? Is it to simply broaden our minds a little or learn something new? If so, what do we Christians have to offer that’s truly different from our media-driven information-saturated age? Indeed, Jesus asks, the crowds went to hear prophecy, but to what end? Surely our lives are not fulfilled day to day through merely having a sense – general or specific – about what will happen next.

If it were enough to know that Christmas is coming, that Christ is coming to us, that this fragile world is ultimately destined to be turned inside out by the Living God, would that end our stress this time of year or lower our anxieties? I sincerely doubt it. At least, it hasn’t yet worked for me.

John the Baptist preached *metanoia*, transformation – repentance as we often hear it translated. Conversion: the utter re-making of the heart in addition to a complete change of life. Jesus asks his followers as he asks us, are we prepared to welcome God at that level, or are we simply along for the ride?

When we approach God’s table we are being invited to not simply show up, but to engage – an impatient and insistent plea from our God in Christ who wants us completely committed. Not perfect. Not in control. But committed. . . in relationship.

John the Baptist warned against hypocrisy last week when he proclaimed the scribes and Pharisees a “brood of vipers.” There is no room in *metanoia* for half measures or mere dabbling. This is not a fake-it-til-you-make-it job, this walk with Christ. God seems to want all of us. We cannot serve two masters, Jesus says, very much in the same vein as his cousin, John. We cannot turn back when Jesus calls us forward and simply bury the dead. We cannot put our hands to the plough and look back. The Kingdom of God, the in-breaking Reign of the Divine, demands our utmost, our fullest attention and commitment.

Somehow, the transformation God demands and then brings to the human family through Christ begins in us. We are, if we dare, the least in the kingdom of heaven, the leaven that will help turn John’s prophecy into reality. We are the doorways for Christ for the world.

That is why our anxiety and stress at this time of year pose a real spiritual danger for us and our sisters and brothers. If we obsess, as we are prone to do this time of year, over the Christmas preparations, we may find ourselves still stressed and in preparation mode on December 26th. We may miss the opening Advent demands of us. We may be too busy to notice the Christ child born in our midst.

Even before the arrival of Christianity in Northern Europe, this time of year was seen as a battle to some degree between light and darkness. I'm not, frankly, all that fond of theology constructed around battle or war imagery. . . but our struggle in Advent, during these darkest days of the year when all of our neuroses, obsessions, and compulsions tend towards overdrive – the struggle cannot be overstated.

Jesus stands at the doorway, knocking. Advent and Christmas are not ultimately for our entertainment, but for our re-making. We are called to stop. To set down our obsessions for a moment, our race towards the finish line, our neurotic pursuit of power. We are called to stop and dare to be re-forged, if we will only put our full selves forward, beyond all the pressures we feel, beyond the shrill demands the world places on us, especially this time of year.

Jesus is in the business of re-making hearts. That is the business of Christianity. For only hearts that are re-forged, fleshy, and pliable, can serve God's reign in healing a broken world. Hearts steeped in compassion, made vulnerable and visible to others, that we might touch one another and be re-united in community. The great counterpoint to all of our activity this time of year is Christ's demand that we stand still long enough for God to begin remaking us.

Yes, indeed, this is a dangerous time for all of us. Stress-filled. But even if we keep running, as we are prone to do, towards danger, we have a Savior who specializes in dangerous times – one who was born in a dangerous time, ministered in a dangerous time, and died and rose again in them. So we are called, in all of our stress this time of year, to engage. Avoid the temptation to check out. Stand still and listen. Hear the call of Christ towards deeper life. And when all the world screams for us to hoard, run, and drop, we are called to give. . . to give and become, for perhaps a moment, the least among us.

For the least will be the greatest, says our God. Remember that with me as we face the horror that not everything will be done in time for Christmas. Remember that with me as we face the dark nights of anxiety, when the family is driving us nuttier than Christmas cake. Turn to Christ when the world demands our fullness only to milk us for all we're worth. And when the children pick up on the stress all around them and reflect it back with torrents of tears and mouths open wide.

Be the least, right there, and know the in-breaking of Christ – that light shining in the darkness that transcends all our expectations and makes us anew – anew for a world that God is still creating in our midst, and, above all, in our hearts.