

The Third Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

December 17th, 2006

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

A Prophet or Two
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

A classmate in seminary – I’ll call her “Marti” – had a penchant for making life uncomfortable. Many of us, of course, were on the ordination track. There was an air in those early years of our moving into ordained ministry that we were God’s gift to the Church, the next wave of leaders who would make the Episcopal Church burst open at the seams with new faces. We sometimes liked to hide our struggles and pretend we had the best answers – and the right ones, whether they were liturgical, theological, ecclesiastical, spiritual, or simply how to better throw the next class party.

Marti would have none of this. She was not on the ordination track. But she was studying alongside those of us who were and constantly burning a hole in our pride with her pointed words. She called a spade a spade. She never failed to point out to us the homelessness present right outside the seminary doors and our propensity to shutter the windows, to hunker down in our self-absorption.

Yes, she annoyed me. She put me on the defensive. I even attempted to argue with her on occasion. Can’t say I ever won. She was a self-avowed prophet. And prophets, self-avowed or not, are a tough-minded, dangerous lot.

John the Baptist says in today’s Gospel:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Welcome to the Third Sunday of Advent.

John the Baptist has a unique place in Christian tradition. In the canonical gospels, at least, he is the only person other than Jesus given a stage to teach.

We can only begin to surmise the myriad of reasons he chose the language he did to address the crowds coming to him for the baptism of metanoia, coming for guidance to begin a pilgrimage of repentance. He was certainly standing firmly planted in the tradition of the ancient prophets of

Hebrew Scriptures – curmudgeons they could be at times with words that cut deep. Prophetic voices have always been like that.

He was very much in line with what we now call the Rabbinical tradition – he used hyperbole, bold imagery, and even shaming words to grab the ears of his listener. Amazing how that still works, 2,000 years later. As comfortable as many of us get hearing these words over and over again year after year at this time, they honestly still make my skin crawl a bit.

Because there’s also apocalyptic in John. No doubt about it. He stands on the cusp of something, or better yet Someone, who is intending to remake the world. As we were reminded last week, John is calling for paths to be straightened and rough places to be made smooth for the coming of the Lord, the God of salvation.

What John the Baptist calls forth in the crowds who come to him, and what I believe he continues to call forth in us today, is the sense of dread we all carry around inside of us. . .that small kernel of unease that sometimes bubbles up as fear. It’s primal – as real as our nightmares. It’s raw, so that in civilized company we go to great lengths to conceal it. It can be ugly. Those who love us most see it sometimes, and it has tested our most intimate relationships. It’s the raw fuel for our anger and the keeper of our comfort zone. It recoils at the stranger and worries about what others think about us.

And it stands as an obstacle, a part of our cross, to the change and transformation of our lives we so desperately need to become more fully human in God’s grace.

So John names these fears, tickles them, and even leads the crowds more deeply into them. By exercising their worst terrors, he pushes them to the spiritual edge. By articulating the threat of their disinheritance as children of Abraham, and, indirectly, children of God, he breaks their hearts, so that they might be opened.

The transformation metanoia demands is no easy journey. Our hearts are often hardened by habit, by the scars of our lives, by the tasks and responsibilities that weigh heavily on us – especially this time of year. Our hearts of stone must be broken to reveal the fleshy, tender, vulnerable places inside where God can work anew.

John in all his otherworldly strangeness, knows this sometimes closely guarded secret about each of us.

He names it, and then he paints the great journey of salvation. Just when we’ve gotten out our fears and worst bits and pieces on the table, just when we feel broken inside and close to being disinherited, when we are most humbled by our falling short in so many ways, we are embraced by a God who loves us and strengthened to lead new lives. In Luke’s gospel, John is very specific about what these new lives will look like.

They begin with compassion: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” The fears now named, exercised, and addressed, they may be set aside. The fears gone leave room for a love that begins healing all the sore places

and empty stomachs of the world, as well as those rough places inside, the hurts we hold, and the roots of all our angers and fears. The path to a free life with God is through our compassionate action for others. . . as well as for ourselves.

And how we lead this life is as specific and unique as our address, our families, our friends, our backgrounds, our vocations. John begins addressing the people in the crowd in exacting terms, demanding that in each of their paths, they lead lives of justice, set aside dishonesty and open themselves to the challenging grace of God.

And Luke closes this account with a remarkable turn of phrase. He calls all this “good news” – gospel. John has laid the foundations for Jesus’ teaching, for the calling of our Savior to lead lives of compassion. John has opened the prophetic door to the coming Messiah, Grace Incarnate, who will make all gospel living possible, the heart of God coming among us first as a small, fragile child who will break our hearts open this Christmas for each other and the strangers just outside our doors.

Let us be ready to hear the voice of the prophets in our midst. They are around. We know them because they make us squirm a little. . . sometimes a lot. What they say haunts us and names our worst fears. And what they call us to is something strange, but very specific and transformative to our unique lives brought together as children of God.

Join me in listening to them with greater care. Like John the Baptist, they are paving the way in our hearts for Christ to come.

So, as Advent draws to a close, be watchful – that calling phrase of Advent – for these prophets both far away and near. . . listen closely to what they have to say. . . and find wonder in what happens next as a Child of compassion is born in our midst. . . born into tender, broken hearts.

Amen.