

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Second Sunday of Advent (C)
Sunday, December 9, 2018

Baruch 5:1-9
Philippians 1:3-11 | Luke 3:1-6

A very popular man dies in Aberdeen, Scotland and his old widow wishes to tell all his friends at once, so she goes to the Aberdeen Evening Express and says, 'I'd like tae place an obituary fur ma late husband.' The man at the desk says, 'OK, how much money dae ye have?' The old woman replies, '£5' to which the man says, 'Ye won't get many words for that but write something and we'll see if it's ok.' So the old woman writes something and hands it over the counter. The man reads 'Peter Reid, fae Aberdeen, deid.' The man at the desk feels sad at the abruptness of the statement and encourages the old woman to write a few more things, saying, 'I think we cud allow 3 or 4 more words fer ye money.' The old woman ponders and then adds a few more words and hands the paper over the counter again. The man then reads – 'Peter Reid, fae Aberdeen, deid. Ford Escort for sale.'

In a week that the country buried its 41st President and its last Episcopalian one to date, the temporary nature of our existence is highlighted for us all to reflect on.

I liked George W Bush's opening remark in his reflection of his father's life. I have heard, he said, that the idea about being a man, is to die young..... but as late as possible!

The secular Novelist and Playwright William Somerset Maugham once said "Death is a very dull, dreary affair. And my advice to you is to have nothing whatever to do with it."

Mark Twain, typically, provides an even sharper edge. "Most people can't bear to sit in church for an hour on Sundays. How are they supposed to live somewhere very similar to it for eternity?"

Of course, it shouldn't take the death of a much loved and respected President or the various desperate cries that emerge from the secular soul of our age, to remind us that this wonderful season of Advent has its deeper, darker and harder side to it.

The last things; Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell are woven together in the Advent cloth along with the great clarion call of hope that opens our hearts and minds to the coming of Christ, now and at the end of all things.

The dark purple of our vestments is both the color chosen as the mark of imperial status by the Roman Emperors, and yet also a color we have come to associate with sorrow and penitence. We look forward to Christ's coming at Christmas, but we also look further forward, to the end of all things, when he shall come again with all the power of God to judge the world. Then, we know, all our lives will be weighed in the balance.

[Episcopalians don't tend to preach much about Hell, because we believe that love is a more powerful force than fear in the end, but we have no choice but to believe in it. Jesus certainly did. You can't read the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares or some of the other sayings of Christ, particularly in St. Matthews Gospel, and not know that. In any case, our reason requires that, if human beings are free to

choose God, then we are also free to reject him. If that is the case, there must be a place for those who chose in the negative.]

You may know the ancient Greek story about Pandora's Box. As a wedding present, Zeus, in order to punish the world of newly created humanity for having received the stolen gift of fire, gave Pandora a jar or a box, but warned her never to open it. Pandora, Zeus knew, was created to be curious, and would not be able to stay away from the box. Sure enough, the urge to open the box overcame her. When she lifted the lid horrible things flew out of the box; greed, envy, hatred, pain, disease, hunger, poverty, war, and death. All of life's miseries were let loose upon the world. Pandora quickly slammed the lid of the box back down but it was too late – all the evil had escaped. Looking inside, however, she saw that not quite everything had gone. One thing remained inside the box, as the eternal possession of human beings, hope.

Today we hear the great call of Isaiah being used by Luke to describe the last great prophet, John the Baptist. Luke makes John this "voice crying in the wilderness" calling on the world to "prepare the way of the Lord."

We may not have spent much time in deserts like the one John the Baptist wandered, but we are intimately acquainted with the wilderness nonetheless.

We only have to switch on our televisions to see the furies from Pandora's box raging all around us. An unkind commentator once described Barry Manilow's rendition of the National Anthem at Super Bowl 18 as, "like having warm sick poured in your ear!" Today, I don't know about you, but when I turn on the news, I sometimes feel like I am having cold poison poured into mine. There is, of course, also no shortage of images of war, poverty, and hunger to see.

Perhaps more intimately disturbing though, are our personal experiences of the spiritual wilderness. The wild unruly beasts that lie in wait for us outside the frail securities of our existence. The betrayal of a friend, the greed or envy that sours relationships, the pain or sickness of a loved one or ourselves, and, of course, death's taking of those who have been the sacred mainstays of our lives. Most devastatingly, those closest to us, of course (I was looking at a selection of pictures of my brother's family over the last 50 years yesterday, and an old sadness raised its head in me once more). But there are also those figures we never knew, but whom we grew up with in our lives. From presidents to TV personalities or the musicians that accompanied the dances of our youth, their passing can appear to us like bright, but distant lights, winking out in the night sky of our lives leaving us a little more in the dark with each one that goes out. I am sure some of you feel that about George Bush. I know my world will seem a very different place when the Queen, who has been there all my life, finally passes from this one to the next.

And yet. And yet, here we all are preparing for Christmas. Buying Christmas trees, shopping for gifts that we hope will give joy and pleasure to those we love, gathering at parties and celebrating the affection we have for each other, and being thankful for the light of life that is in us and, in our homes and our families.

And here we are, preparing the Church for the coming of the Christ child, getting out the Creche, ordering the flowers, rehearsing the children's Christmas Pageant and preparing the glorious worship we will offer with gladness and song in a few days' time. This is much more than the tiny, lonely figure of hope left in Pandora's box. This voice that sounds in the wilderness of our souls and lives, this Christian

faith we proclaim, is not the thin plaintive cry of human beings trying to be brave and amusing in the face of the darkness. Our faith is born of the wilderness. It comes out of the wild and harsh realities of existence and it is tried and tested and forged in them. The last things; death, judgement, hell, and heaven are actually not the very last of things. The truly last thing is when:

“the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

One day there will be no more cold poison being dripped into our ears, no more shall we be subject to Pandora’s escaped monsters. One day, but also today.

Here in the worship, life, and service of this Church, we see the salvation of God. Despite the wild beasts of our world, our hearts and lives are being prepared, made straight, smoothed, and leveled out.

From plainsong chant and Christmas carol, to clinking glass and affectionate laughter and fellowship, to the service of others in shelter, soup kitchen, and all the many other people we serve but do not see, in all these things and in the sacrament in which we meet him, we see the salvation of God and our way is prepared a little more.

When the time comes for our obituaries to be written, we may also deserve just a few more words to be added to our name, where we come from, and the fact that we are dead. Not, hopefully, an advert for the sale of our no longer needed Ford Escort!, But rather, something like “ Fred, from DC, dead. A child of the wilderness that answered God’s voice”