

A Sermon by the Reverend John McDuffie
The Second Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:17, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

He's back! Just when you may have thought that you had successfully navigated the solemn notes and warnings of the first week of Advent, and now were ready to get out the holiday decorations and shop 'til you drop, along comes John the Baptist—the prophet of the Advent—who shows up every year on the second and third Sundays of the season.

Scripture tells us that large crowds went out to hear John and be baptized by him. But despite that, I must confess that at first glance I've never personally wanted to spend much time with this guy. Not only the clothing and the choice of diet turn me off—it's his whole message that I find scary. "You brood of vipers!" he sneers at the Pharisees and the Sadducees who have come to him to be baptized. You may find fault with these people, because Jesus did in the Gospel stories. But let's face it—these were the respectable religious leaders of the day. If John showed up at Christ Church this morning, he would call the rector, assisting clergy, and the Vestry of the church a brood of vipers. And the ominous notes of warning are heard in John's telling us, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And lest you thought that John would be followed by the tender shepherd, the man from Galilee, he tells us that one mightier than he is coming—I'm particularly drawn to St. Luke's version, in which John proclaims, "he will gather the wheat into his barns, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." We are told that with many similar exhortations, John preached the good news to the people. Friends, if that's the good news, I don't want to hear the bad news. No tender shepherd, no babe lying in a manger here...

It reminds me that with the new liturgical year, we are in Year A of the lectionary cycle, in which we'll hear mainly from the Gospel of Matthew, which is replete with thematic material related to judgment. In fact, the last Sunday of the Church's year, which will be next November 22, we will hear Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats. It is fitting that a parable about judgment will end the year.

However, while there may be stories and themes in the Gospel that relate to judgment, you will notice by paying close attention that there is another theme that will show up again and again in Matthew—it comes in the refrain, "Do not be afraid." In fact, you will hear it for the first time two Sundays from now, in which an angel says to Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary to be your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

I would like to invite us for just a moment this morning to "be not afraid"—particularly so that we can explore the real key word of John's preaching, which is repent. I would guess that most

of the time when you and I think about this word, we assume that it simply means to say “I’m sorry for the things I’ve done, and left undone”—that, after all, is what we say in the confession in church. But “repent” has a much richer meaning than that. In the Hebrew Bible, the word that translates as “repent” is shuv, which literally means “to return”, or “to turn around”. With all due respect to the compelling preaching of John the Baptist, I would nevertheless invite us to think of God not as the angry One who is coming to find out who’s been naughty and who’s been nice—but instead as the One who is like the stranger who sits apart from us across a crowded room, where there is so much distracting noise and anxiety around us that we fail to notice him. He is waiting, and looking at us with eyes of love, and is quietly beckoning us to be not so distracted—but instead to simply turn from the noise and turn to him, and go sit there and ask him to look at our lives with us and find out how our lives might go differently.

Repenting involves movement of some kind—that is the “bearing fruit” of which John speaks. In our baptismal liturgy, we speak of “turning to God, and accepting Jesus Christ as our savior.” In the baptisms of the early Christian Church at the Vigil of Easter, those new to the faith would be facing west at the beginning of the liturgy, where the sun of an old life was setting—and then would physically turn to the east, where the bright morning star of Christ was rising.

In the New Testament, and in this morning’s Gospel passage, the Greek word translated as “repent” is metanoiēte, the imperative of metanoia, “repentance”. In Greek classical literature, this word literally means “to change one’s mind”—i.e., you’ve been looking at life and the world in one state of mind, and now you are changing, and you are going to do something that shows that you are changing.

Recently I re-watched a film that is all about repentance. It is The Apostle, starring Robert Duvall as a southern Pentecostal preacher. In the story, Duvall discovers that his wife is having an extra-marital affair. He becomes enraged, and in one impulse-ridden, violent moment he kills the man she has been seeing, and then flees from the police. There is a moving scene in which he is alone as a fugitive, and goes into a river and goes under the water, re-baptizing himself and asking for God to grant him a new course in life. He subsequently founds a new church, bringing together both whites and African Americans into one worshipping community, helping to change lives, and attitudes—until, of course, at the film’s end, when he has to voluntarily submit to the legal authorities who have found him at last.

It’s Advent—a time replete with many distractions as people hurriedly prepare for Christmas. But God has a dream—this week I invite you to read, and re-read the first lesson appointed for this Sunday, from the 11th chapter of the book of Isaiah—it is a vision of a peaceable kingdom, where reconciliation abounds. And I invite you to repent—to turn back to God if you’ve been following a pathway of distraction, and invite Christ to look at your life with you. Where do you need to change your mind? Where might you have made false assumptions, and false choices, and need to set a new course, a new direction? And how might you bear fruit, that signifies the change? It’s not easy work—but it’s good work!