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St. Luke's Episcopal Church - Anchorage, Kentucky
The Third Sunday of Advent – December 10 & 11, 2016
Matthew 11:2-11, Isaiah 35:1-10

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen. (Ps. 19:14)

“Stir up, your power O Lord. With great might come among us” (Collect). The third Sunday of Advent is commonly referred to as ‘stir up Sunday.

"Advent, like its cousin Lent, is a season for prayer and reformation of our hearts. Since it comes at winter time, fire is a fitting sign to help us celebrate Advent...If Christ is to come more fully into our lives this Christmas, if God is to become really incarnate for us, then fire will have to be present in our prayer. Our worship and devotion will have to stoke the kind of fire in our souls that can truly change our hearts. Ours is a great responsibility not to waste this Advent time." *Fire of Advent* authored by Edward Hays, *A Pilgrim's Almanac*, p. 187

John certainly wasn't one to waste time, and he was surely one to stir things up, as we experienced during the interview with the standing committee last weekend! He was a man filled with passion and fire. Yet, in spite of his brazen, fiery preaching people came from all over to hear what he had to say... and his message was quite simple really ... “get your act together, get yourselves sorted out, and repent, because God is about to bring forth judgment.” He stirred things up by telling the crowds to stop what they were doing and change, ... because the day of the Lord was at hand; stop lying and stealing, and start loving each other the way that God had intended. He certainly wasn't one to mince words. He had not tolerance for it!

One particular hell-fire sermon John delivered on marriage and divorce fell on the ears of Herod, who had been involved in a scandalous relationship with his brother's wife, and so Herod exercised his authority to have John silenced once and for all by quietly disposing of him in a dungeon.

After months of his imprisonment had passed by one would wonder what may have been going through John's mind. Did he perhaps pray "God, is this your will for me? Prison? Really? This dire situation would ultimately prompt John to call on his disciples to find out what was happening in the real world. Upon reporting back to him they shared that people were seeking out Jesus in droves - and instead of preaching "Fire and Brimstone" sermons like John, Jesus was preaching grace, mercy, forgiveness and love, while also partaking in meals with tax collectors and sinners. Moreover, Jesus (reportedly) never spoke publically about Herod's scandal, so perhaps John wondered whether Jesus was avoiding John's fate in prison. Who knows? Ultimately, John decided to have his disciples go and ask Jesus "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Some biblical scholars have conjectured that John struggled with doubt, and this is why he had the inquiry made of Jesus. However this inquiry, as recorded in the gospel, was revealed not to condemn John, but to encourage and strengthen subsequent disciples whose faith would come to be tested by hardships.

When the disciples asked Jesus "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Instead of answering them directly, Jesus responded by saying, "take it easy, stay with me for a while ... watch... and listen ... and then go back and tell John what you have seen". For Jesus knew that John needed encouragement, and a word for him this time would not be enough. John needed to hear from his disciples themselves just what Jesus was truly up to.

The disciples witnessed the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, lepers cured, deaf hearing, and the dead being raised. While witnessing these miracles prophesied by Isaiah (as in this morning's reading) John's messengers would also hear the good news that Jesus preached to the poor. Jesus knew his mission, and John's doubts did not hinder him, as he knew that John would recognize the words prophesied in scripture and that they were being fulfilled. Jesus said to the disciples "go and tell John what you have witnessed, and John will understand". ... And so they returned to John sharing what they had seen, and John then knew that Jesus was the messiah, because John knew the Scriptures. Jesus pronounced a blessing on John referring to John his *promised forerunner*.

This important narrative teaches us how difficult faith may seem when we are tested for our work in growing God's kingdom, and sharing the good news, the gospel of Christ. Yet it equally demonstrates how Jesus lovingly strengthens his people, and that includes each of us, to complete their task of faith, and to walk in faith. When we choose to walk in faith, it can often be a challenging journey, and it most often is. This is why our faith must be stirred up, so that we don't fall into the throws of complacency or mediocrity! Nope! Luke warm simply won't do!

We must learn to hold the demands of our busy world and our steady walk of faith together in a healthy tension. A poignant example of this...(Ordination vow renewal story).

This holy season of Advent, is similar to the penitential season of Lent, in that it is a season for prayer and reformation of our hearts. Therefore, Advent is an opportunity for us to reflect on where we have been, but most importantly, Advent is a time for us to look forward for what is to come.

Let us pray:

Lord, make us to walk in your way. Where there is love and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor resentment. Where there is poverty and joy, there is neither greed nor despair. Where there is peace and contemplation, there is neither anxiety nor boredom. Where there is mercy and prudence, there is neither excess nor harshness. Lord, stir up our hearts, stir up our faith that you may live in us and we in you all the days of our life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.