

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Romans 15:4-13  
Matthew 3:1-12  
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Here we are in the Second Sunday of Advent. As we light the candle for Peace and think about all the additional chores we must accomplish before the Big Day.....Christmas.....arrives, we are startled by the presence of John the Baptist. And he embodies anything but 'peace.'

Dressed like Elijah and spouting hellfire and brimstone, this is the last person we want to see at this time of year. Our minds and hearts are much too busy with the tasks at hand to be caught up short with the blunt and point blank admonitions of John the Baptist. While we are busy choosing Christmas gifts, getting our tree put up, baking special treats, writing Christmas cards and going to parties, here is John the Baptist yelling at us: "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come?" That's not what we want to hear right now. It's judgment and recrimination and we are looking forward to the coming of the Christ child.

But here comes John the Baptist.....the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make the paths straight for the coming of the Lord. "His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Are we really as bad as all that? Are we the chaff? Are we going to get burnt up in unquenchable fire? "Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he says. And don't rest on your genealogy to save you. Just because you're sons of Abraham, don't think that you're going to get a waiver. And there's an ax ready to fall on any tree that doesn't bear good fruit. When it falls, it will be thrown into the fire.

**REPENT! REPENT! REPENT!**

All right, already. We get it. Or at least we think we do. We hear it anyway. We're supposed to repent. But what does that mean? What does that look like? Why are we being asked to do that now? Aren't we supposed to be looking forward with great expectation to the coming of the Christ child?

We are. And now that John has gotten our attention.....and it's hard to ignore John the Baptist.....can we hear what he is saying? And if we can hear him, do we know what it means?

He's crying in the wilderness.....and that's where all of us are.....in the wilderness.....the wilderness of our own thoughts, our own struggles, our own worries, our own disappointments, our own griefs and hurts, our own hard hearts, and our own preoccupation with the daily necessities of life. We are, indeed, in the wilderness. And it's from that spot that John is speaking to us.

The wilderness is an important part of Israel's relationship with God. All through their experiences in the wilderness, God cared for them. He gave them manna from heaven; water from a rock; and birds to

provide meat for them. He gave them the law and he guided them toward the Promised Land. God did not forsake them. God loved them and cared for them even when they were disobedient. God loved and cared for them even when they turned away from God and attended to more pressing human needs and the daily necessities of life. God did not abandon them, but God waited on them to turn to God. And even in our own wilderness, God does not forget us, but waits for us to turn toward Him.

So John is telling us to repent.....to make the paths straight for the coming of the Lord. What does he mean about repenting? Is he asking us to be sorry for the things that we've done wrong? Partly. Feeling a sense of regret or remorse is only part of it. To repent means to change direction. To repent means to reorient ourselves toward God. We can't make a place for Christ or make straight the path until we clear out some of the underbrush.....until we fill in the valleys and level the hills.

Advent is not only a time of preparation, it is a time of reflection on *how* we prepare for the coming of Christ into our hearts and into our minds and into our lives. It is a time when we willingly subject ourselves to those momentary blinding flashes of insight when we can see ourselves accurately.....and perhaps as others see us. It is a time when we contemplate the things that we harbor in our hearts that prevent Jesus from taking up residence there.

Our sins are not, for the most part, the obvious, over-the-top, unforgiveable ones. Most of our sins tend to be those things that we unknowingly allow to block Christ's entrance into our lives. Perhaps it is a grudge that we just can't or won't give up. The hurt was too great and our anger is justified, so we refuse to forgive the undeserving and in doing so, we put up a Do Not Enter sign on our hearts which Jesus respects. Perhaps this grudge nurturing is a valley that needs to be filled to make way for the Lord.

Perhaps it's not a grudge that we need to relinquish. Maybe it is worry about some transition in our life. Our imaginations run wild and we can think of all the worst possible outcomes and how we might prepare for each one of them. Instead of allowing Jesus into our hearts and trusting in Him, we use all our energy to bar the door with worry to keep him out. Perhaps the worry is a hill that needs to be leveled to allow a straight path for the Lord. Or maybe it's the guilt we feel about some horrible trespass in our life that we simply can't forget, can't forgive ourselves for and refuse the offer of God's forgiveness. We cling tightly to that guilt believing that feeling guilty will somehow make us worthy to present ourselves to God. Our thinking is that if we feel guilty enough and are sorry enough, God will forgive us. The guilt is not what makes us worthy. What makes us worthy is embracing the incarnation of God in the Christ child. And forgiveness has already been offered to us. We simply need to accept it and let go of our guilt.

The Christ child is about to join us. What are we doing to make room for him in our hearts? What dreams do we have about what will happen with the coming of the Kingdom that God has promised? Do we believe that promise? What dreams do we have about life right now? How do we imagine the best of all possible worlds? What would that look like? What do we need to do to be the tree that bears good fruit? Most of us tend to equate 'good fruit' with 'good works.' And that's often what we see. But it's not a bad idea to remember what Martin Luther had to say about 'good works.' He reminded us that "Good works do not make a person good, but a good person does good works." That's a thought-provoking statement. Bearing good fruit means that we believe in God's promise of the Kingdom to come and that we align not only our hearts but also our actions with that promise. In what we choose to think and how we choose to act, we are co-creators with God of the kingdom that he has promised. What resides in our hearts is every bit as important as what we do. We don't always know what the

'good fruits' are specifically, so we can't will ourselves to do certain things in order to bear good fruit. What happens is that we are gifted by the Holy Spirit and when those gifts are needed, they will emerge from those who are devoted to Christ and who exercise love for others. When something needs to happen, and we have volunteered to be the bearer of good fruit, the Holy Spirit will prompt us to act to use the gifts we have been given. Gifts that perhaps will come as surprises even to us.

It's important to remember that God chose to come to us while we were still in sin. He didn't wait for us to get it right. He didn't wait for us to express our regrets and ask for forgiveness. He didn't wait for us to repent. He came to us while we were still in sin. He came to us when we were disobedient and wandering in the wilderness. God came to us because of an overwhelming and extravagant love for us. In his letter to the Romans that we are studying in our adult formation class, St. Paul tells us: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

We don't repent so that we can earn God's love. That's already been given to us. We don't repent to avoid incurring God's wrath. We don't repent just to get in God's good graces. WE already are. We change direction.....we re-orient ourselves, not so that God will love US, but so that WE can love God.....and in turn, each other. We repent so that we can have the great privilege of being co-creators with God in the coming of God's Kingdom.

Well, John the Baptist got our attention. Dressed like Elijah and bellowing hellfire and brimstone and chastising the most self-righteous of the ones in his audience, he told the truth. He told us to get ready. Get ready, because the Kingdom of God is at hand. Prepare yourselves.....your souls and your hearts. He's on his way. The incarnation of God in the form of a vulnerable and helpless human baby is about to happen. He's coming to us whether we deserve it or not. He's coming to us whether we repent or not. But if we want to welcome him in, we need to re-orient ourselves. We need to reset ourselves. We need to do the repenting so that we can love him back. God wants that connection to be complete.

He'll be here soon. Are you ready?

It's the most wonderful gift we have ever received.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.