

Sermon: Advent 5

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 4, 2016

Year A

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

I've had some jobs... I've held some positions... where... over time... I became a valuable employee... who did things and knew things no one else did or knew... and there was a time or two... when I came back from vacation... that there was an almost collective sigh of relief from some co-workers... because now they didn't have to do their jobs and try to do mine too...

And there were also a few things I felt interested in... felt might challenge me... some jobs or some committee work... I tried something new that stretched my boundaries and my comfort zone... and failed... sometimes miserably...

But when I was in the Air Force... I trained for thirteen months... at significant government expense... as a medical laboratory technician... and when... about six months before my enlistment was to end... I decided not to re-enlist... the *government* decided to discharge me four months early... it really wasn't inconvenient for me... I really didn't mind... but what didn't make sense... was that I was an asset to them... I was good at what I did... and they could have gotten several more months of additional work out of me... out of their investment... but no... they knew that other recruits would come after me... and land in the same job position... so I was expendable... and the truth is... there's always someone else coming down the pike...

Some of us without doubt... have particular aptitudes... or gifts... for our callings... our vocations... but there are others with the same gifts... who can learn to do what we've learned to do... the trap we need to avoid... the lesson we need to learn... is that our gift doesn't equal our worth... the lesson we need to learn... is reverence... and reverence begins with an honest and deep understanding of our limitations...

Paul Woodruff wrote: an irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless... unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself... as a result... an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself...

And we can have respect not only for people... but for systems... and things... when I think about the oceans of the world... I feel respect... and awe... and fear... the oceans are deep... dark... chaotic... and unpredictable... there is great beauty... but there is also great danger... from beautiful but poisonous creatures... to predators with sharp teeth... to steel-crushing pressures... there is awe and respect for what I cannot see... what I cannot control... and what is not ordinary...

Church consultant Calvin Chinn wrote: The Baptist doesn't fit the norm of how we picture ordinary people... like so many other people... he is subject to our prejudice and dismissal... so in appearance as well as in word... John preaches repentance... a command to reorient ourselves... to turn from our former ways... to change our attitude and perceptions... and those whose hearts do not change... who lack integrity and character... who are challenged to... but do not bear fruit worthy of repentance... John indicts as *a brood of vipers*... John's command is to act out of awe and reverence... instead of out of being afraid... and reverence begins with a deep understanding of our own limitations...

Theologian John Shea reminds us... that John the Baptist's vocation... is to lead the heart to the place where God will speak... but too often... for too many people... the city creates such a din... that we cannot hear God whispering in our heart... that may be why the prophet Hosea wrote: *Therefore I will now allure her... and bring her into the wilderness... and speak tenderly to her... from there I will give her her vineyards... and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope... there she shall respond as in the days of her youth... as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt...*

There's a backstory to the Valley of Achor... here's why Isaiah refers to it... Achor means trouble... and the Valley was named Trouble... because Achan... of the Tribe of Judah... stole some objects that belonged to God... objects previously owned by the people of Ai... objects that were *devoted*... which means they were intended by God to be completely consumed by fire... objects that belonged to God because God secured Israel's victory... but Achan took a beautiful mantle from Shinar... and two hundred shekels of silver... and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels... and buried them in the ground beneath his tent... and as a result... he and his family and his animals were punished by death... but Isaiah says... that the Valley of Trouble will become a Valley of Hope... the same kind of hope... when after four hundred years of slavery... of being oppressed... the Israelites were ready to listen to God... and be God's people...

John listens to God... and baptizes people... washes off the toll of living... returns them to freshness... he pushes them beneath the water... and pulls them out... ready and eager for new breath and for new life... and if this heart leading... this *metanoia*... this repentance... is engaged in correctly... the baptized will be able to use the Key of David to unlock the experience of Isaiah... the Key of David unlocks the heart... and enables us to perceive the Kingdom of Heaven which is already here... right in front of us...

It's like one of these auto-stereograms... where you focus your vision just beyond the image itself... just behind the thing at which you're looking... which can be hard to do... which can make you feel a little bit dizzy... and even when you learn how to do it... even when you get it right... your vision can still shift a little... a little too close or a little too far... and you fail to see... what you want to see... and the Kingdom of Heaven is like this... right in front of us... but it's not our eyes that need to come into focus... it's our hearts that need to come into focus...

The first half of today's reading from Isaiah... is about heart and hope... it describes the qualities of the divine king... who doesn't judge based on what is seen... or decide based on what is heard... but arbitrates from an unlocked heart... and the second half

of the passage describes the kingdom itself... in which there is equanimity and peace... and today's reading from Romans mentions hope... four times... hope sustains us... because when we find ourselves in a dilemma... when we realize that our own efforts... or those of others... aren't enough... when we respect the fact that we cannot control the wind... or some pressing crisis that's swirling around us... when we find in ourselves a willingness to acknowledge our human limitations... our powerlessness over the cosmic waters of chaos... we can come back to the waters of baptism... and what they have unlocked for us...

Who has this Key of David... we do... but it works more effortlessly... when the lock of our heart has been oiled with the awe and reverence... and the fear the respect of the Lord...

As individuals... we cannot be replaced... there has never been and there will never be another one of us... and God is not looking to diminish our preciousness or our value... God loves us... God cares about us... God wants the best for us... God blesses and forgives us... and invites over and over again to be co-creators... but God also judges our suitability for the job... God has a plan of fulfillment for this created universe... and when we can't... or don't step up to the plate... when we don't live into our potential... if we're not bearing the right kind of fruit... God will find someone who will... and God is so keen on this goal... that if needed... God will even raise up righteous children of Abraham... from stones...

1Corinthians 13 tells us that: *Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

Advent reminds us that one day... our faith will become something we see... as we use our hearts to see the Kingdom of God that's right in front of us... and our hope will be realized in the Peaceable Kingdom that Isaiah describes... and then we won't need faith or hope... because in the eternal state... the greatest quality... which is love... will engulf us... and love will never cease...

And for that we say... Thanks be to God!

Mike+