

Sermon: Advent VI

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Year B

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

I don't know if anyone besides me remembers Gracie Allen of the husband/wife comedy team Burns and Allen, but I ran across a quote attributed to her in a book of theology recently, which caught my attention. She says, "Never place a period where God has placed a comma. God is still speaking." I thought, that really sums up the root of many religious conflicts throughout history, and applies to our Gospel reading from John as well.

The temple priests from Jerusalem had heard of the crowds of people going to the Jordan River to be baptized by the eccentric outdoor preacher John, for the forgiveness of sins. John was only one of a number of people and groups who had left Jerusalem in disgust at the corruption in the temple, and felt God would forgive sins just as well by the act of water baptism. So the temple sent priests and Levites, experts in the law, to go talk to John and maybe intimidate him and get him to stop. They asked John why he was baptizing, if he was the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet, and what were his credentials for presuming to have the authority to forgive sins with water baptism?

Now John wasn't intimidated, and he didn't really answer the question about why he was baptizing. He admitted he wasn't the Messiah or other important person, and then took them by surprise by telling them there is someone else, whom they do not know, who would come after him, who was this important person. He quoted from the prophet Isaiah, saying he was the voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way for the Lord.

There was tension in this encounter between the two opposing religious positions. The temple priests, although they might not admit it, had put a period on God's words, and John had erased it and put a comma there, indicating that God had more to say. However, even John didn't fully understand what God was doing. He did testify to the light and baptized Jesus, but after Jesus began his ministry and John was put in prison, he sent messengers to Jesus asking if he was the one, or was there someone else? John was probably expecting Jesus to actively oppose the temple priests, not hang around with the poor and sick. People with power and position, including religious people, and mostly men, tend to overlook the creative character of God, both in the sense of motherly compassion, and in the infinite variety and beauty of all the life on earth, in favor of the judge or king aspect, expecting punishment rather than mercy, and this might include even John. The thing about a creative God rather than a judicial God, is that the present is always open to fresh starts, forgiveness, and unexpected ways of doing things, rather than keeping track of past deeds. So trying to interpret the law and prophecy through a formula or academic theology is not the final word, because God is free to show mercy and grace and things beyond our imagining, which is certainly what happened with the incarnation. Maybe that is why we still need to walk by faith, because the possibilities for our lives are still open, and none of us are beyond God's help.

I think it was the Franciscan Richard Rohr who wrote that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. It's when we are certain, that we try to put a period on what God says, because we believe we have the complete revelation. That's when we start excluding others and oppressing them, regressing into legalism, and falling asleep spiritually. We don't like living with the tension and doing the hard work growth takes. Spiritual practice without the Holy Spirit, always ends up focusing on personal morality and pious devotional practices. However, this type of religious activity does not get below the surface and produce any meaningful change or growth in our spiritual life, and usually is in denial about our own shadow, the repressed parts of ourselves we can't accept. Jesus sought out the poor, oppressed, sick and suffering during his

ministry, not the privileged people who had everything they need. Jesus made them whole, freed them from oppression and gave them food. Likewise the Spirit seeks to integrate the split off parts of our lives, which once accepted, will make us whole.

Once I had my initial encounter God, my spiritual life was full of light and life and I thought things would stay that way. Gradually, however, that started to change, until finally all the comforting feelings were gone, and I was left in the dark silence, and it seemed God was absent. This made me uncomfortable, and I looked for answers that would explain what was going on spiritually. The well had run dry. I no longer found charismatic prayer meetings exciting and our small group seemed dull, so I left. Although it may have appeared to some I was making a mistake, it gave me the space I needed to get healed.

I was in a different place spiritually than the rest of my friends and doing what they did, didn't work for me anymore. My intuition told me that I wasn't lost or misled, even though I seemed to be walking in the dark. But I didn't know where the Spirit was leading me, and that was necessary, because I would never have gone there of my own accord. And it's the same with all of us. Thomas Keating, a monk and leading advocate for centering prayer has written, "The spiritual journey is the commitment to allow everything we possess to be taken away before the (physical) dying process begins."

All the mystics tell us God has to work with us in the dark to keep us from interfering in the process and getting inflated with ourselves. When we are powerless, God is able to transform us more deeply and thoroughly. I found out that the Spirit was leading me to a place where the repressed hurts of my dysfunctional family life were revealed to me and healed, and this turned out to be a very long arduous process, that involved also dealing with melanoma and the loss of my health.

Once completed, this healing journey in the dark allowed me to get unstuck from my past, and live more fully in the present. I found, freed from my past, life in the present

was more enjoyable. I could see the strength and endurance I had gained, and God's purpose for me. I would say that this journey showed to me what Paul's words, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," are really asking us to do.

As Paul exhorts us, developing a regular prayer life is vital in sustaining a relationship with God. Placing ourselves constantly in God's presence, we start to develop the ability to pray while we work and go about our lives, and we become comfortable just being with God in silence. Our awareness and consciousness expand as we make more room for God. We start to go from knowing about God from the Bible, to knowing God in our heart, and being constantly surprised at how much more God is than we imagined. Our reading from Isaiah tells of God's tenderness and compassion, and somehow these words take on a deeper understanding for us. Somehow we know and understand things we can't articulate. Instead of being separate from God, we are entwined together, and we become more aware that God has a specific vocation for us to perform, and we see God's plan is much better than ours, so we gain the desire to do God's will. Once we change from doing what we want, to seeing through God's eyes, we can rejoice and give thanks in all circumstances, because even setbacks and failure are a useful part of our lives, and we can recycle them into something better, because God is still speaking. God's plan for us, is to prepare us for what we will become after our transition through death; that is, to become a part of the dynamic life of the Trinity. Seen through the eyes of faith, no matter what happens to us, God will complete the work he has started, and by faith we can rejoice in all circumstances. Therefore prepare the way for the Lord!