

Sermon: Advent 6

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Year C
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Canticle 9
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

In today's continuation of last Sunday's Gospel... John the Baptist continues to lay out the parameters for a baptism of repentance... *and with many other exhortations... he proclaimed the Good News to the people...* this needs to be unpacked though... because at first glance... a brood of vipers... an axe lying at the root of the trees... chaff being burned with unquenchable fire... don't all sound quite like the Good News I want to hear... but it is...

And John says to the crowds... *do not say... we have Sarah and Abraham as our ancestors... for I tell you... God is able from these stones... to raise up children to Sarah and Abraham...* so don't think you're so special... don't think that what Ancestry DNA may reveal about whether your ancestors wore *lederhosen* or a kilt... is enough to spare you... don't think that because of who Sarah and Abraham were... that what you don't do today doesn't matter... because the fruit that they bore... the faith that they had... is not your fruit... or your faith...

Yes... it's true that Exodus 34:7 says that God keeps steadfast love for the righteous to the thousandth generation... but don't rest on your laurels... don't get lazy or complacent about what you could achieve now... because you're too busy basking in the memory of your former glories... what are you doing now... how are you living out your faith now... what fruit are you bearing now...

And the crowds asked him... *what should we do then...* it's simple really... John answered... if you've got two coats... share one with someone who doesn't have any coat... *oh is that all... we can do that...* and if you've got some extra food... and you

come across someone who's hungry... give some food to them... *oh is that all... we can do that...* and the newly baptized tax collectors asked... *what should we do...* it's simple really... John answered... don't collect any more than the amount prescribed for you... have compassion... remember through no fault of their own... these people are having a hard time paying their bills too... *oh is that all... we can do that...* and the soldiers came... with their weapons and imposing armor... *and we... what should we do...* it's simple really... John answered... don't obtain money from anyone by force... threats... or by any other unfair means... or by falsely accusing anyone... and be satisfied with your wages... *oh is that all... we can do that...*

As Fr. Mike Kinman wrote... prophets were not fortune tellers... they were people who spoke boldly about the natural consequences of the people's actions in a world... where God was the only true power... and the consequences of anyone's betrayal of God are inevitably negative... the three groups that John mentions... represent the three layers of Jewish society... common people... the commercial class... and soldiers... and there is a call to repentance... to *metanoia*... to turning around 180°... inside... for everyone... *we can do that...*

So why is it then... that when we look around us... it can be difficult... sometimes seemingly impossible... to see Good News... it's because what John is talking about... is a radical upending of society... and society can only be changed... when there is a tipping point... a phase transition... when the hearts of the individuals which make up society... are changed...

But there are in history... and there are those now... who take comfort in their roles of privilege... who believe they are insulated from being called to account... who believe the rules don't apply to them... or that they can get away with things that others can't... just what makes us feel that way... and what would John tell you to say to yourself...

Rejoice in the Lord always... again... rejoice... and the peace of God... which surpasses all understanding... will guard your hearts and your minds in the love of Christ Jesus... now that's Good News... and here's another type of Good News that may not seem at first glance like Good News... have you ever gotten angry at someone because you love them... have you ever raised your voice because you care... have you ever felt passionate enough... to want more out of those you love... have you ever told someone that you knew they were capable of so much more than they were giving... capable of bearing more fruit... better fruit... sweeter fruit...

Fr. Kinman writes... the prophetic image of Christ coming in wrath to separate the wheat from the chaff is scary stuff... but it's also an image of a God who really... really cares about us... this is not a God who is apathetic about humanity... and that's how [even] this harsh message... can still be called "Good News."

I think it was the Sermon Brainwave folk... who suggested that in the last part of last week's Gospel... the Preparing the Way part... when the Israelites were returning from the Exile... where the valleys are being filled in... and the mountains and hills are being made low... and the rough ways made smooth... this is not being done to make it easier for God to get to us... I mean... how can we prepare the way for an omnipresent God... who is everywhere at once... on Earth and at the farthest reaches of the universe... so this Preparing the Way thing... is to make it easier for us to get to God... the text doesn't say... "prepare the way FOR God..." but "prepare the way OF God..." prepare to embody God's way... in our hearts... in our minds... and giving consent for the Spirit to fill us...

And the people were filled with expectation... the Greek word that's translated as *expectation*... also means to watch... to anticipate... to await... the people were filled with Advent... and all were questioning in their hearts... whether John might be the Messiah... but John said...

I baptize you with water... but one who is more powerful than I... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire...

Kinman writes... you don't have to do anything new... you just have to truly be... who you are... that's the message of the incarnation...

The coming Messiah that John is proclaiming... isn't going to magically turn us into something new... the emerging Christ is going to lead us deep into our truest selves... Jesus is coming to bring us fully alive...

So what do we do... we welcome the image of God... the embodiment of self-giving and generous love... that is inside each one of us... and let who we are on the inside... be who we are on the outside...

Mike+