

Church of the Holy Spirit
II Advent Year C 6 December 2015

The season of Advent is a season of preparation, a time of getting ready. And so, each year, we set aside four weeks to prepare ourselves once again to remember the story of Christ's first coming and to renew ourselves for living in the very real and dangerous world of today.

In place of the psalm, this morning we read from the Prayerbook's Canticle 16, which is a telling of the story from the perspective of Zechariah. Zechariah, you will recall, was the father of John the Baptist, and the *'Song of Zechariah'* is a hymn of thanksgiving for John's birth as well as a foretelling of his place in salvation history. The words of this thanksgiving were most likely an early church hymn, and Luke uses them to introduce us to John prior to the birth of Jesus. "*You, my child,*" his father Zechariah says, "*shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way – to give people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.*"

Interestingly, prior to introducing John with this hymn, Luke began his gospel with these words: "*Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you.*"

And in the third chapter of Luke's "*orderly account*," he places these events in the context of a very real and dangerous world – the world when Tiberius was the Roman Emperor, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod the puppet ruler of Galilee, the years when Annas and Caiaphas served as Jerusalem's high priests. In other words, these happenings that Luke records are not cleverly devised myths of some unspecified time, but rather real events that are located firmly in world history, but which also bear great significance to the relationship between God and all of humanity.

In this very real world, there was a man named John (later to be nicknamed "the Baptist") living in the barren desert of the lower Jordan Valley, to whom Luke says, "*came the word of God.*" John then began to preach a message of repentance and forgiveness to the people living on the outskirts of Israel's capital. The biblical basis for John's evangelical campaign was to be found in words of the Isaiah. Eight centuries before, the prophet had written: "*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.*" (Isaiah 40:3-5; 52:10)

Our first lesson today comes from the Book of Baruch, probably written only a hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and it echoes the hope of Isaiah: "*Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem... For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.*"

Next Sunday, John and some of the content of his preaching will again be the subject of our gospel, but for today we simply hear it summarized as "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*"

But what does that really mean? John wasn't asking for baptisms of new converts to Judaism. No, his baptism was for people who were already a part of the people of God. Rather, what he was looking for was an awakening in his world, calling people to be ready for the coming of God's messiah.

What exactly does repentance for the forgiveness of sins mean? Well, 'repent' simply translates 'turn anew, head in another direction.' And I think most of us by now have come to understand that sin is not that endless list of petty slights and moments of dishonesty that mark everyone's lives. No, to be in a state of sin is to be separated, separated from God, separated from others, perhaps even separated from one's true self.

So to "*repent for the forgiveness of sins*" means to turn anew and to end that separation – to act differently - in order to understand and experience a new relationship with God, a better relationship with others, and perhaps even with ourselves.

Thus the message of John should not be viewed as one of gloom and doom, not an out of date proclamation of fire and brimstone, but rather a declaration of new possibility, the possibility that you and I can act differently, that we can once again turn anew and end the separations that divide our dangerous world.

This week, with another incident of mass shootings, we were once again reminded of frightful divisions that make our world a dangerous place to live. Two people, apparently with passions inflamed by hatred, inexplicably abandoned their six month old child and set off on a rampage of murder.

Their motives are not totally clear. They shot people they knew, some of whom were Muslims. But how does one respond to such acts of violence? Should we redouble our military efforts to destroy the Jihadist movement in Syria and Iran? Should we try to arm and train more of the civilian population of this nation already awash in guns? Should we be so fearful of the other that we close down mosques and attempt to register anyone of the Islamic faith who happens to live in America? Will any of these end the separations that exist in our world? Or is it all just hopeless?

A vision of hope is what defines our Advent. Advent is not a reminder of our foibles, our failings, our petty sins, but rather the reassurance that this is God's world. Advent comes with a vision of the possibility of our separated world reunited, a world restored. And our task as a people of hope is to "*prepare the way*" for it.

There is an old African proverb which says, "*If you educate a boy, you educate an individual. But if you educate a girl, you educate a community.*" That proverb is not just wishful thinking. Pulitzer Prize-winning authors Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn wrote a book titled *Half the Sky* that tackles the very difficult subject of gender inequality around the world. While I found its reading painful at times, it leads to hope.

Their thesis was not simply moral, but pragmatic. "If we educate...girls and give them employment opportunities," they wrote, "then the world as a whole will gain a new infusion of human intelligence – and poor countries will garner citizens and leaders who are better equipped to address those countries' challenges."

One of the real world stories they told was of a young girl from Zimbabwe. Like many women around the world, she didn't know when she was born. She didn't get a formal education because she was a girl and was expected to do household chores. She herded cattle and looked after her young male siblings. Her father would say "Let's send our sons to school, because they will become breadwinners." So off went one brother, while she stayed home. But he was an indifferent student. And when he came home, his sister would pore over his school books. She taught herself to read, and eventually begin doing his homework for him.

Her brother's teacher was puzzled that the boy was a poor student in class, but always turned in perfect homework. When the teacher uncovered the truth, she begged the father to allow the young girl to go to school. That only lasted for a couple of terms, when her father had her married off at about age eleven. Her husband barred her from returning to school and beat her whenever he found her reading. Luckily, this young girl was one of a group of women in her village when it was visited by the female president of Heifer International. That woman persisted in asking the village girls, "what are your hopes?" – insisting that they were achievable. And that word of hope sunk in.

To skip to the end of a very long story, today that young woman has completed her education, has a Ph.D., and is now a productive economic asset to her country. One more testimony to the proverb's truth: "If you educate a boy, you educate an individual. But if you educate a girl, you educate a community."

I recall an Army Colonel serving in the Kanar Province of Afghanistan during the war there, who said "the long term solution to terrorism is education." I believe that is true, I believe that is where we can put our hope.

Advent is about hope. It is about turning anew and ending separations.

This past Wednesday night, our Family Worship group held another one of its wonderful monthly meetings at Holderness School. There were, I believe, four or five families of our parish represented, and after dinner in the school cafeteria, we spent an hour crafting Advent wreaths and trying to help children ranging from kindergarten to third grade understand the meaning of Advent. So I told them that Advent has many traditions and one of them is the naming of a theme for each of the four Sundays of the season. The first Sunday's theme is hope. The second is love. The third is joy, and the last is peace.

I have been thinking about those four themes this week as we try to come to grips with the awful things happening in our world today. Hope – Love – Joy – Peace. The opposite of hope is fear. The opposite of love is hate. The opposite of joy is anger. And the opposite of peace is war.

We have a choice. We can be hopeful people, or people filled with fear. We can be loving people, or we can give in to hatred. We can be joyful people, or we can respond to hurtful things with anger. And we can choose to be peaceful people, or a people constantly at war.

A few years back, one of our bishops, unhappy with one action or another of our last General Convention, accused our church of, in his words, being “indiscriminately inclusive.” - Indiscriminately Inclusive. He meant that to be a negative, but I, on the other hand, see that as good news, as an indication that perhaps we, as a Church, are still capable of hearing the word of John, and turning anew once again to prepare the way of the Lord so that *the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

Amen.