

Advent II December 7, 2008

Advent is about preparing for the good news of Christmas; for what Christmas has to offer. But what that looks like is less and less clear. Now that we are into December, and deep into what the world calls ‘the Christmas season’, there seems to be an ever-increasing weight to the holidays. So much of what the world out there is offering at Christmas is not really good news—instead it’s all about stuff we don’t need. We don’t need the aggravation, the busyness, the constant demands, the advertisements, the never-ending pictures of what families and Christmas are supposed to look like that don’t really look like either your family or very many families you know. We don’t need the hassles, we don’t need the time spent messing with things we don’t care about. We don’t need so much of that stuff.

It seems that every year I hear more and more people talking with real pain about how hard this time is. Every year I become more and more convinced that the happiness and good feelings that the world out there tries to offer us during this season, ring false. That’s one reason we’re going to try a Blue Christmas service this Thursday evening, to give folks who are hurting a chance to offer that hurt to God, and to discover that they are far from alone. I am convinced that, if there is to be any good news at all during Christmas time, that good news has to come from somewhere other than the ‘holiday season’ that is going on so powerfully all around us.

That’s where John the Baptist comes in—preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (by the way, we get John the Baptist twice in a row this Advent, so we get to see the two faces of John. This week, we hear from Mark’s Gospel; then, next Sunday, we get another perspective on him from the Gospel according to John.) Anyway, the more we realize that we need something different from what the TV specials and the sales have to offer, the more we realize that it’s time to listen to John.

John says that what we need is repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John says that, before we can recognize, before we can know, the one who comes after John, the one who is mightier than John, the one who baptizes with fire, before we can do that, we need to repent, for the forgiveness of sins. He's right. That's how the good news of Christmas begins. You won't hear this out there, the only place in the world you will hear it is in here.

And we need to hear it. It is important to listen deeply to the call to repent—which means to turn around. John is saying that the Lord, the one who baptizes with fire, is coming because we, by ourselves, are not enough. The world, by itself, is not enough. All of the world's promises and goodies are not enough. Even if they're on sale. Listen, someone is coming to show us how life should be lived, because we do not know, by ourselves, how life should be lived. When we try to live our lives based on what *we* know, and on what *we* think is right, and on what *we* think is good—when we rely on our own best judgments, on our own deepest passions, on our own fondest desires—when we try to live based on who we are and what we can do, we mess it up; and people we know, and love, and care about—they mess it up, too.

And we know the truth of that and the tragedy of that, and the pain of that. In one way or another we look at that pain, and we live with that pain, every time we read the newspaper, and every time we look around us, and sometimes even when we look in the mirror.

And John the Baptist says that someone is coming, someone who knows what it means to be a human being, someone who knows what matters and what doesn't matter, someone who knows what works and what doesn't work, someone who knows what's O.K. and what's not O.K.

Someone is coming who can offer us a vision of what human life can be.

Because this is true, because someone greater than he is coming, because of this, John appeared preaching repentance, for the forgiveness of sins.

Look at so much of life these days, look at the lives of those around us, look at what so often happens to people, to good people with the best of intentions, who are trying hard. Look what so often happens to them, to us, (and to the kids). Look, and you see such stumbling, such confusion; so many folks who just don't know what to do, or what is right, or how to begin. Look around, and you so often see a hopeless sense of being lost and bewildered in the face of all the confusion, all the heartbreak.

John the Baptist came saying that someone is coming after him who offers a different way, a better way. So we need to stop doing what we have been doing, and we need to start doing something different. We need to stop looking where we have been looking, and look instead in a different direction. We need to stop following what we have been following, and we need to start following someone different.

We need to stop putting our hopes and our dreams where we have been putting them, and we need to put them somewhere else. We need to stop looking for solutions, and for insight, and for happiness, and for programs, and we need to start looking for forgiveness—and for the one who is to come. That is what John the Baptist is saying.

And this is the first word of the real good news of Christmas. It's the word that Christmas offers what we need. It offers a savior. This is what we need, because we cannot save ourselves—indeed, we can hardly *manage* ourselves. And God loves us. God loves us very, very much. So God sends us a savior—this Christmas, and every Christmas.

But this great gift isn't automatically good news, because we need to stop and think; we need to grasp what we really need. Otherwise, we will continue to run around after our own best ideas; and, worse, we will try to find ways to make the coming of both John the Baptist and the Lord himself somehow useful to us for getting what we want. The gift of a savior becomes good news only as we hear the call to repent—for the call to repent puts responsibility and failure right where they belong.

It also puts hope right where *it* belongs. The call to repent makes it possible for us to realize that what we need *the most* is not a therapist or a helper or an enabler or a facilitator, or a coach, or a counselor or anything like that—sure, we may from time to time need any or all of those, and be better for them—but none is what we need *the most*. What we need the most is a savior.

There are all sorts of things we need to do to get ready for Christmas, which is only about 17 shopping days away. This year, let's also do what the Church calls us to do.

In Advent, the Church calls the faithful to hear the word of John the Baptist, who came preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins.