

3rd Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.16.24

Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.” With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day: “Give thanks to the Lord; call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Luke 3:7-14

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

John was wrong.

Not about everything, but about a couple crucial things.

But don’t just take my word for it.

John the baptizer is the herald of Advent, playing a prominent role in two of the four Sundays of Advent. This, because he was the herald of Jesus, the one whose proclaiming was to prepare the way for Jesus.

He came about this position naturally. So goes the story anyway. John is the son of old Elizabeth, the one young Mary visited while each were pregnant. These two women were cousins, “kinswomen” is the word, and so the babies they were each carrying were cousins as well. Indeed, old Elizabeth’s baby jumped in her womb upon hearing young Mary’s voice.

So goes the story.

Their intertwining, then, (Jesus' and John's) started early and would only continue. Really, it's always worth noting where John appears in the gospel narrative. It's usually just prior to some action Jesus takes, or some response Jesus feels. John's appearing in the gospel narrative should have us looking for Jesus' response. Ever the herald, ever the way-maker.

That said, they were also different from one another, something that would become all the clearer as time went on.

John's father was Zechariah, a Temple priest who'd been struck dumb while in the inner sanctuary. The angel Gabriel had come to him in the sanctuary, that secluded sacred place where it was his turn to serve that day. (Priests take turns.) Gabriel had come with news of John's conception and birth yet to take place—this though both Elizabeth and Zechariah were old. When Zechariah pointed this out—that both he and his wife were old—Gabriel said that for this incredulity Zechariah wouldn't be able to speak until John was born and named.

And so, it was.

John must never drink wine or strong drink, Gabriel also said, because as it was, he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He wouldn't need any more spirit in him than was already the case, which was the case since before his birth, indeed since long before his birth. John's lineage on his mother's side goes all the way back to the prophet Aaron, Moses' brother.

In this way, John was, we're to understand, a strong mixture of prophet and priest. He was formed and informed to be full of holy certainty, fierce righteousness. Like, "You brood of vipers," he seems quite comfortable in saying to the crowds of people who came out for baptism. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

That which was to come, the one who was coming: John had clear ideas of what he would be like, how he would conduct what business he was here to conduct. "His winnowing fork is in his hand," John seems fairly sure would be the case, "and he will clear his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the granary," John seems convinced would be the case, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

But, see...

Dramatic irony is when a character in a story asserts as true something the audience knows is wrong. In a tragedy, dramatic irony is often at the heart of the tragedy. Othello didn't *know*, didn't know not to trust Iago. King Lear didn't know, didn't know not to trust his own ego-needs. Romeo and Juliet—neither knew what the other had been up to, what the other had planned. But the audience does know, and this lends to the sorrowing tragedy of it all.

In a comedy, for its part, dramatic irony is often the source of the hilarity, the wellspring of joy.

Case in point: *Cheers*. The great sitcom of the 80s, *Cheers* owned Thursday nights. A retired baseball star whose career was ruined by alcohol addiction opens a bar. In Boston, called Cheers, it employs one other bartender, whose dim wits but sweet heart are always good for a laugh, and two waitresses, one a townie from Boston proper, and the other an academic from elsewhere, as academics usually are. There are three “regulars,” all men, and together these make up the givens of the show.

The variables are who is to come into the bar on any given day.

Indeed, one of the ways an episode often plays out is that someone who’s always in the bar is waiting for someone who’s never been to the bar to stop in for some stated reason. And we get all this anticipation about it. Norm’s waiting for his boss, Frasier’s waiting for some colleague who bested him in medical school, Sam’s waiting for an ex-girlfriend who wants to return his record collection. And in the anticipation, we get a picture of who’s coming. Norm’s boss is a strict, scary monster. Frasier’s rival is a square-chinned Ivy Leaguer who was born to humiliate everyone around him. Sam’s ex-girlfriend is a manipulative harpy who only wants Sam to suffer.

And then, after long minutes of build-up and prolepsis, the person comes in.

And they’re nothing like what we anticipated.

Which casts the question back on the one to herald the one who’d been coming, who set what our expectations should be: What’s wrong with you that you had our expectations all wrong? What does that say about *you*?

Always good for a laugh.

Shall we soon laugh?

“You brood of vipers! Bear fruit worthy of repentance!” Hectoring toward repentance probably doesn’t get us there, unless...

Well, repentance, a favorite preaching point of mine, if because it’s prominent in several lectionary readings this time of year, and because it casts the wrong tone in so much of our hearing.

The Hebrew original for the English “repentance” is *teshuva*, simply meaning to return.

The Greek original that gets translated “repentance” means something quite different, but not in conflict. The Greek original is *metanoia*, which breaks down *-noia*, as in a form of knowledge, and *meta-* meaning behind or before or above or beyond. Like, “meta-physics” to

indicate the reality beyond the physical reality, or “meta-morphosis” to indicate a morphing or change that is utter and thoroughgoing.

Metanoia, then, is the sort of knowledge that is above typical knowledge, a return to this perhaps native wisdom. Metanoia is that which is beyond typical, worldly knowing. An utter and thoroughgoing knowing: a knowing yourself, what you’ve done, what you’ve been up against, what you’ve aimed for; and a knowing the world, what makes it teem with hope and wonder, what rightly fills us with the awe—the sublime; what also makes it mired in un-freedom and dark determination and even tragedy. *Metanoia* is to know as God knows, which is to know God. It is to know with depth, and with grace and forgiveness and hope. It is to know with love, to see with love.

And, yes, repentance can have a hard edge, a *sharp* edge, which might be how you tend to hear it—because to know yourself is to know where you’re guilty, where you’ve been wrong, where you’ve pursued that which is not God. But the sharpness of repentance, of this transformed return, isn’t the sum total of it, is but a side-effect of coming into a grand knowledge that reveals (among other things) how off the mark much of your living has been—which is true for us all. We have all been off the mark. We have all sinned.

But hear this: if your repentance is all sharp edge, then the mind you’ve come into isn’t metanoia as much as paranoia: paranoia, the sort of knowledge that’s divided from itself, a mind running on parallel tracks, and which takes on an adversarial tone against itself.

I hate how much religion seems more paranoid than metanoid. I hate how much the God of Christianity has inspired paranoia more than metanoia.

Because, see, what metanoia should actually *look* like is but this: generosity and integrity and a gracious rather than abusive use of power. See, because the people ask in response to John’s hectoring. He’s going on, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance! Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!” And the people ask in response, “What must we do?” and he has a list at the ready.

For what it’s worth, I think this is itself an interesting response: “What must we do?” I like the quick understanding of this: that this coming one of whom John is the herald, the metanoia that this will enable and indeed inspire, requires a response, a *lived* response. Truly, this is a matter of doing (the right thing) and not simply being (of the right bloodline).

Which, frankly, is a nice change from what's come before. We've been moving with Mark's gospel through the last church year, Mark's gospel which presents a Jesus whose effect in the world is singular and unmistakable. Jesus alone is the presence of the kingdom of God—which, though wonderful as that is, makes it hard to know how anyone other than him is to join in the project of trying to make real the reign of God in our midst. What's more, the disciples according to Mark seem especially hapless and incapable, hardly even understanding.

Luke's gospel comes at us with a very different confidence, less that Jesus alone can manifest God's presence and more that the Holy Spirit is the power of that presence, and this Spirit goes where it will, present to Jesus, present to the disciples, present to the church as will be the main character in Luke's sequel text, the Acts of the Apostles, all about the work of the church following the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. Though Jesus has gone, according to Luke, the power of the Holy Spirit is yet very much at work—in this, the church, which interestingly has been born as of fire, an unquenchable fire.

Remember? On Pentecost? When, fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus has ascended and suddenly the Holy Spirit, this ancient person of God, comes down in a new way and rests as of tongues of fire on all who are gathered in Jerusalem that day. Their time of mourning has passed. Their time of confusion and fear has passed. A new time of confidence and good purpose and joy has arrived.

So, these earliest activated, just now having come out for baptism, asking what they must *do*: if they have two coats, they should give one of them to someone who has no coats; and if they have plenty of food, they should give half of it someone who has none. Likewise, if they're caught up in a system of the world by which there is only hardly justice (as most systems of the world can rightly be characterized) then they should operate in the midst of it with as much integrity as possible, even tax collectors collecting no more than is dictated by the empire, even soldiers not using their frightening power to extort or to intimidate but simply to protect and to serve.

Fruits worthy of repentance: the sorts of behavior that follow that change of mind that is repentance, that come naturally, of confidence and new faithful conviction: generosity, integrity, no need to act abusively in power. At the very least these. No doubt, John got this right, if not in tone, then at least in essence.

The people, filled with expectation, wondered whether John might be the Messiah, but here too he was right. He was not. The one who was to come would be even more powerful than he.

But he assumed that meant he would be like John but more—baptizing not just with water but also with fire, a winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; “but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

And I’d say on this point, John was wrong.

But don’t just take my word for it. Watch; watch this year as we walk through the story again.

And, yes, I bet you’ll see the Lord will have come in fire—and from this will forge the church, the church, where the burning will be as candles in the dark, where the Holy Spirit will burn as gentleness and joy, unquenchable fire which is to say not a punishing fire or a tormenting fire or a consuming fire but a sustaining fire, as of the fire that burned that bush of long ago, burned it though didn’t consume it, sustained it as eternal being burning beautifully through all that is.

We move toward Christmas.

Come to the stable.

Kneel at the manger. This baby, before whom we discover what we should again and again discover to true in church, in our repentance: the joy of being wrong.

Thanks be to God.