

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, December 5, 2010.

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

I heard a lot of folks talking about Christmas this past week – about shopping, decorating, cooking, traveling, dreading, panicking. I didn't hear anyone talking much about Advent, however. Our church calendar tells us that these weeks in December are the season of Advent which is a time of reflection, anticipation and even penitence, and that Christmas doesn't actually start until December 25. Whoa! Christmas doesn't start til December 25?? This is a radical thought when we are surrounded by stores that replace Halloween candy with poinsettias and tinsel, when radio stations proudly begin playing only Christmas music in early November, when homes are lit up like beacons to space before the Thanksgiving turkey is a left-over.

But it is Advent, and really only the beginning. Why is no one asking me 'What are your Advent plans?' 'Do you have a good Advent cookie recipe?' Nor am I hearing "How are you preparing for the coming of the savior?" At least not until I opened the Gospel of Matthew for this second Sunday of our new church year and came face to face with fire-breathing, hair-shirt wearing, remarkably powerful John the Baptist.

I've always been intrigued by John – he's such a straightforward, in your face, no holds barred fellow. Folks knew right where they stood with John – he didn't play games or dance around the truth. What other preacher could ever get away with addressing his congregation as a "brood of vipers"? My better judgment certainly steered me away from beginning this sermon that way. Try to picture him: he's a young man, about 30 years old, with shaggy hair, strange, probably smelly, clothing and a loud voice. So, he comes among us, as he does each Advent, and his message sounds inconvenient and out of season. Here we are, ready to get cozy by building a fire in the fireplace, wrapping presents, sipping hot chocolate, and making sure we know where the windshield ice scraper is and here he comes, with a wild message. He wants us to do spring cleaning – right here just before Christmas! As if there weren't already enough to do, he wants us to take on one room after another, and not just in our houses but our lawns, garages and storage sheds as well. He tells us to repent.

The word of the Lord came in the wilderness to John son of Zechariah. He went all around the region, we are told, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He quoted the prophet Isaiah. His message was "prepare" In the wilderness, prepare for the coming of the Christ. In the desert, prepare for the coming of the King. In your life, be washed, be clean, be pure. Your imagination, your mind, your heart. Repent – literally turn around and go in a different direction. Turn away from the sin of this world and turn your lives in a new direction. Turn to the one who would come after John. Turn to the one whose sandals he was not worthy to carry. Turn to Jesus...to God.

In today's passage, John's harsh words seem to be aimed at the Sadducees and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. They came to be baptized by John, but instead he turned on them with words about bearing fruit worthy of repentance and being burned by unquenchable fire.

It is difficult for most of us to think of repentance especially at this festive time of year when peace and love are the emphasis. It is always difficult to think of repentance because it

involves coming to grips with all those things which stand in the way of life as God meant it to be lived. Deep beneath the surface of our daily activities roam jealousy and pride that lead to personal conflict. Underneath our pleasant “season’s greetings” run self-centeredness and defensiveness that lead to alienation in relationships and distrust. Behind the busyness of this season roars the unwillingness to listen and understand which leads to preemptive wars and never-ending retaliation. John wants us to stop and call such behaviors into question. He wants us to be upset by this, to cry out because of it, to long to be free of it. John wants us to stop and make our paths straight. John wants us to clean house – now.

Maybe he has a point – maybe our spiritual houses are a bit of a mess. There are rooms dominated by clutter. There are corners where the dust and dirt of angry words have accumulated. The attic is full of cast off relationships, boxed up grudges. There are signs of neglect and ill repair in our bodies which should be the temples of God. The outside is no better – there are weeds of distrust where the flowers of friendship used to grow, the driveway to ministry to others needs repaving, and the fence between us and our neighbor needs mending.

John the Baptist comes along, and highlights all these defects, drags his finger through the dust, kicks aside the soda can and newspapers and demands that we make changes - now. We have a lot of work to do. He insists on all of this because somebody is coming. He calls us to repent because the kingdom is near. He wants us to sweat and struggle through spring cleaning, even in December, because he knows the results will be worth it. John knows who is coming. So - he drags in a huge dumpster and plops it right in our front yard to take care of the trash we need to dispose of.

What can you throw in? Put in that dumpster instances of pride, hypocrisy, and impatience from your life. Toss in anger and envy. Put into it lust for people and for things, dishonesty in relationships, negligence in prayer and worship. Throw in the times you have turned your back on the poor, the homeless and the needy. Pile high that dumpster and let the prophet haul it away.

When we clear out all that hardness and dishonesty, negligence and fear, what will fill up the space? Clearing out the clutter of our lives opens up space in our hearts that can then be filled with the love of Christ. After the cleansing of repentance, there is forgiveness. John proclaimed that his baptism for repentance is for the sake of forgiveness. If we listen, God is constantly making the offer to relieve us of the stuff that keeps us down. This is the good news of Matthew’s Gospel and John’s message. This is the good news of Advent. This is the gift of the season.

At this time of year when we are so concerned with gifts – buying gifts, wrapping gifts -- we learn that we can receive the one perfect gift – the gift of grace.

Let’s be honest, we all like to receive gifts. Yes, there is joy in giving gifts certainly. I had a fun yesterday shopping for Share your Christmas items; I’m pleased with the gifts I bought at the Alternative Gift Fair. I love to see the look of surprise on someone’s face when they open a gift I have carefully chosen for them. But it’s just plain fun to receive a gift. This Advent and every day we are offered a gift that is better than any present wrapped in shiny paper, better than any stocking stuffed with goodies. The good news from God is that we are offered a new world to live in, a world marked by grace, a world that revolves around the fact that life itself is a free gift from God.

I read something awhile back that stuck with me, and I’m afraid I will butcher it. It went like this, “I hoped God would come. I prayed for God to come, and when I prayed I discovered God was already there.” God is with us, bidden or unbidden. God is with us never to leave.

John wants us to prepare – now. And while Advent is a time for slowing down and reflecting, there is a certain urgency in all of this. A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple said, “Our devotion is not to hold us by the empty tomb; it must lift up our hearts to

heaven. Our devotion must send us forth into the world to do His will.” Our waiting, our preparation in Advent is to give us energy to work for the dream of God. It gives us time to sort out the important from the superficial, the crucial from the temporary. By waiting, we learn to welcome.

Paul calls the people to real work, to “welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”. Therefore, we must, as a community, reflect on how our hearts welcome the other into our lives, how our community is in relationship with each other, with Durham, with our world. The end of this welcome is a call that we “may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul speaks to us as a community, as brothers and sisters gathered together. Look around you. Who in this place is lonely this Advent? Who in this community is filled with sorrow because things are different from last year? Who in this house of worship is frightened about what next week or next month will bring? And who in this family, can reach out in love to comfort and care? We come to this table with one voice to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be grounded in love, in grace.

Today is the day of John the Baptist. Today is the invitation given to you and to me to prepare for the coming, the coming of the Christ. John speaks through the centuries with urgency – prepare and do it now. Repent. Do not wait until it is convenient. Drop everything else and do it now, today. Repent and receive God’s gift of grace. Nothing is more important, more necessary. To clean out your hearts, make the paths straight and the rough ways smooth, repent and turn in a new direction. Get rid of things that stand between you and God. Clean out and make room in your heart. Reach out and accept the great gift. Fling open the door so that you may see the salvation of God. *Amen*