

December 10, 2023
Second Sunday in Advent

Prelude

Announcements

Lighting the Candle of Peace The Napier Family

Reader 1: In the days when God's people longed for peace, Isaiah declared:

“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:1)

Reader 2: We who gather today also seek comfort and peace, yet we are unsatisfied with ideas of peace that tell us to keep quiet and go with the flow. We long for real peace, true peace, just peace.

Congregation: We wait as people who yearn for peace that bears the fruit of community, equity, and flourishing for all.

Reader 1: We light these candles as signs of God's shocking hope and just peace. May they be beacons calling us to repent and to live the good news of Jesus Christ as we wait and watch and labor for the day when all people can gather together to worship and glorify God. Amen.
(light 2 blue candles)

*Hymn 88 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verses 1-4

Prayer of the Day

**May this eternal truth be always on our hearts:
that the God who breathed this world into being,
placed the stars in the heavens,
and designed a butterfly's wing,
is the God who entrusted his life
to the care of ordinary people
and became vulnerable that we might know
how strong is the power of Love...
a mystery so deep it is impossible to grasp,
a mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore.
May this beauty and mystery work within us, calling us to live full lives- loving, serving,
and growing in grace, as we seek and extend forgiveness in Jesus' name. Amen.**

*Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Friends, Jesus knows our hearts and our intentions. He is always more willing to forgive than we are to ask for help. With Christ's help, our misguided steps can be corrected and turned around for good. Believe the good news of the gospel: in Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven. Be at peace.

First Reading Isaiah 11:1-10

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 3:1-12

The Morning Message

We lived in Middleport, Ohio, for a few years. On Main Street in a duplex that had once been the Unitarian Church. We liked to say it had been converted. It was a town of churches and small stores. The Post Office, town dentist and a couple of doctors were just down the street. We could see the elementary and junior high schools from our bedroom window. The mayor lived next door.

In the summertime, a lot of families lived in campers on the riverbank and when something exciting was happening, they would broadcast by CB radio, "The Delta Queen is going to come by in about an hour. Better get down here so you won't miss it."

Sweet. Quaint. Small-town concerns and values. It is woefully depressed now, but, was a great place for us to start our family life. Entertainment was centered around the schools and churches and Little League and the Fourth of July Ox Roast, and the historical society's Christmas Open House.

Our kids were about six and one when we were walking around the neighborhood after dinner one fine night. It was our main form of evening entertainment in those days. Life in a quaint old town made for pretty pictures, but, the sidewalks were in poor condition. Roots and broken pavement made the walk hazardous in any direction. You just learned how to get around them and continue walking.

We were navigating our way around the block. Per usual, Katy's idea of fun was to do everything the hard way, so while Ed and I walked forward, pushing SB in her stroller, Katy walked backward. We kept warning her that she was going to trip and fall, but, she paid us no mind.

There was an immovable and imposing obstacle not far ahead. An ancient tree, its branches wide-spread, its equally wide-spread roots just under the sidewalk, pushing up the pavement. You had to find a way around it or your walk was sure to come to an unfortunate end.

“Katy, turn around. Turn around. If you don’t turn around, you’re going to run into…”
At that exact moment she turned around but it was too late,
simultaneously smacking her head into the hard, crumbly bark, and saying in her five-year-old voice, “Tree.”

That experience was the first thing I thought of when I read the gospel text for today. It fits. Once again, John the Baptist comes shouting his warning to anyone who would listen, “Repent! Turn around before it’s too late!”

Into the beauty and busyness of this holy season, here he comes. Dressed in animal skins with insect legs stuck between his teeth.

It’s tempting to try to slip past John and just focus on the sweeter parts of the nativity, but, it’s the second Sunday of Advent and John is here. And John is the last of the prophets, the last of the forerunners of Jesus. So, we must pay attention.

The four gospels give us a variety of narratives about the life of Jesus. Matthew and Luke are the only gospels that tell the story of his birth. But even they differ. Luke gives us shepherds. Matthew gives us magi. Mark and John come empty-handed to the Christmas party. The first thing they all agree on is John the Baptist. He shows up in all the gospels wearing the same clothes, shouting with the same message: “Repent. Turn around. For the kingdom of heaven is near! Prepare the way of the Lord!”

It doesn’t matter which gospel you read, if you want to get to Jesus, you have to go past John. John is the last of the prophets. He doesn’t call himself that, but he fits the requirements. He is dressed like Elijah, he sounds like Isaiah, and he is standing in the water that marked the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land. In this way, John provides continuity, the bridge from the prophetic tradition to the birth of the gospels.

And that’s important, because of his message: Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise. Jesus is the branch that grows from the root of Jesse. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is *here*.

So John may look like the prophets of old, but, he comes with a new message. Much of the prophetic tradition is mechanical in its approach. It reminds me of plane geometry proofs: *If we sin, then God will punish us. If we repent, then God will forgive.*

From Isaiah to Ezekiel to Joel, there is an on-going theme of, “Shape up or else.” The variable is the behavior of human beings. Faithfulness or faithlessness, of Israel or Judah-but that’s not John’s message.

John doesn’t say, “Repent, OR the kingdom will come near.” That would be more in line with prophetic tradition. Isaiah says, “Behold the Day of the Lord comes, cruel both in wrath and fierce anger!”

Joel is more descriptive: “The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord come.”

When we hear these messages, we might come to believe that the kingdom of heaven is something to be feared, not welcomed. But, John is not announcing a threat. Nor does he say that the kingdom of heaven is a reward.

This illustrates something I treasure as someone raised on Reformed theology. God’s realm is compelling, it draws us into its arms and feeds us on a diet of grace. We may sin, surely we will, but God is ready to forgive before our confession is even upon our lips.

What John is saying is we’ve entered a new reality: The arrival of Jesus Christ is God’s doing. We can choose to be a part of it or not, but, here it comes, full of grace and truth.

Repent is a churchy word. We hear it most often at our time of confession. And, we do *repent* of our sins. We are heartily sorry, and ask God to forgive us and set us back on the right path. That’s what we say in so many of our Sunday morning liturgies.

I had the chance to try this out last year on Black Friday. You may remember this story. My daughter was in and wanted to go to the mall. Everything was ok until we got to Ulta and stood in a line that wrapped around the store. But we did it because of the great coupons we had on our phones. Only, we kept losing internet service. By the time we got to the front where we would check out, patience was wearing thin. The clerk couldn’t find Sarah Beth’s member account and then, I was told my purchase didn’t qualify for the coupons. Really? Then why was I getting emails every 20 minutes urging me to come, save my money at Ulta? Oh, it was because the coupons weren’t good on any day that ends in “Y.”

And, I may have said some of that out loud. No kidding. I confess. My bad.

Thankfully, John the Baptist showed up in his outfit you’d never see in Ulta, and gave me a poke which prompted an apology. There are real problems in the world. Problems that should provoke us to anger and action. Saving \$4.00 on my mascara really didn’t qualify.

But, repentance is more than being sorry. In the Greek, it really means to change one's mind. Biblical scholars refer to it as reorienting, reordering, or re-centering. Resetting.

Presbyterian author Anne Lamott once said that most things can be fixed if we just turn them off for a while and back on, including ourselves. I've tried it. My phone will reset if I turn it off and let it rest. When I turn it back on, the images that were stuck begin to respond to my touch, my connection to the internet is restored. Most of the time. Sometimes, my screen goes from shades of gray to living color. Kind of like flowers that bloom in the desert, as predicted by the prophets.

To simplify it, this is John's message: We need to stop from time to time. Take our inventory. Reset our priorities, re-order our lives. Take a different way to work or home. See something new. Let go of a pet peeve and turn your attention to a real problem you can do something about. Return to God.

The kingdom of heaven wasn't lost to the idealized past. The kingdom of heaven is not in the glorified future. The kingdom of heaven is here.

The kingdom of heaven is just as much with the crew painting and fixing up Main Street and Central Avenue as it is with the singers who will gather this evening to work on the cantata or the chaplain who visits patients in the nursing home.

The kingdom of heaven can be found in sweet small towns all over the country, in the patrol cars of our law enforcement officers, on the playground of every school, on the docks where all those Christmas packages are loaded.

The kingdom of heaven is with the people of Ukraine and Syria and in many of Africa's small countries, and at our borders, and Israel and Palestine.

At times like this, when conflict and death have wrought havoc again in the Holy Land, we may ask, "Where is God?" friends, I believe this with my whole heart: God is with the hurting, the sick, the grieving, the dead.

One day this week the Today Show did a segment with a Rabbi and a Protestant minister as this is a season of celebration for both Christians and Jews. Their topic was how to live peaceably with one another, given our differences.

Their conversation turned to the conflict in Israel-Palestine. It is not new. It is centuries old. Is peace possible...now or ever? They agreed that all people should live in freedom, safety, and

security. Those are the by-products of peace. All three of the world's great religions-Judaism, Islam, and Christianity- believe this. And it behooves us to pray and work for peace for all of us.

Savannah Guthrie was conducting the interview. At the end she asked each of the clergywomen what her prayer would be in this season. The Christian pastor replied, "Peace for all God's people."

The Rabbi replied, "I pray that the hostages will be released."

Let us pray for both.

*Hymn 113 Angels We Have Heard on High

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn Christmas Doxology (insert)

*Prayer of Dedication

Most generous God,

you have entrusted us with gifts and asked us to use them in advancing your kingdom.

And so, in this season, we bring our gifts...

and we offer ourselves, our lives, our hopes and fears,

our dollars, and our hours.

We commit ourselves to work for your world, to love and serve and celebrate wherever you call.

We ask your blessing on this church, seeking to follow you in Jesus' name and in his manner, that our efforts may multiply and we might grow in faith, hope, and love. Amen.

*Hymn 88 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, verses 5-7

Blessing

Go now. Wait and work for the coming of the Lord.

In the wild places prepare a straight path for our God.

Lead lives of holiness and godliness,

Strive to be found at peace,

and speak freely of the Lord's comfort and promise.
And may God, our shepherd, gather you in loving arms,
may Christ Jesus reconcile justice and peace within you;
and may the Spirit fill you with holy intentions. Amen.

*Postlude