

ADVENT GETS PERSONAL

Advent 3 Year C – Tannum Sands

Zeph. 3:14-20; Isa. 12:2-6; Phil. 4:4-7; Lk. 3:7-18

Tannum Sands 12/12/2021

All around us the stores and schools and everyone else seem to be celebrating Christmas already. It's understandable—we can't do it all on December 25. But here in the church we are still in the season of Advent, when we are looking at the scriptures for ways to push back the darkness.

We can also see more of ourselves in these times. There we discover darkness as well, the shadowy recesses of sin and sorrow that are easily hidden with a little ingenuity.

The hope of Advent is that the light is up ahead. We can see a glow just over the horizon, and if we've been paying attention to the Christmas specials and cards we've received, we can imagine what is just out of sight. It must be a nativity scene, where we can creep up silently and bask in the soft light shed by the haloes encircling the heads of the holy family, and the mystical beams of light emanating from the manger. Once again we will experience the magic and the mystery of the incarnation.

But wait. As we get closer, we realize that the light is coming not from a stable, but from a fire. And there is a crowd gathered round, a mixture of farmers and soldiers and women and tax collectors and children. For some reason, they seem enthralled by a hairy fellow who is ranting about repentance and waving his axe in the air for emphasis. This is not a scene you'll see adorning our homes during Advent. This is not part of the usual Nativity scene.

In order to get to Christmas, if we are following the lectionary texts, we have to pass John the Baptist on the way. And he is not one who can be easily appeased or ignored. It seems that, in the midst of our steady diet of warm, fuzzy Christmas goodies, comes a bitter pill. We must confront John, the one hand-picked by God to get people ready for the Messiah. It seems odd. John's ministry happened 30 years after the birth of Jesus. What's it doing on the list for December next to all those texts about rejoicing?

Well, perhaps the reason for this is that it would be dangerous to go without it. Without the preaching of John, we would have a perspective on the incarnation of Jesus that would be far too broad, and consequently, meaningless. We can discuss Jesus' birth in terms of

his accommodation to our needs. He came as a human, as a helpless baby, to identify with humankind, among other reasons. We often talk about his purpose for coming to earth, the angels singing “Gloria,” etc. because the way has been made clear for us to come to God. And thus we can keep it all in the realm of theology and creeds—at arm’s length along with the presents and decorations and programs we have carefully arranged in our annual ritual.

But John won’t let us get away with that. Maybe that’s why God picked him—he was a sharp one, and he wasn’t easily fooled. We might want to celebrate God redeeming the whole lot of us. But John gets in among us and peers into the eyes of the one least wanting to be noticed and says, “What about you? Are you really one of the redeemed, or are you just trying to sneak in for the ride? Don’t tell me you are a descendant of Abraham, whether you’re the Old Testament type by blood or a New Testament version by faith. Show me your lifestyle, and I’ll tell you if you’re serious about it or not!”

See, John helps us examine ourselves during Advent. You might not think that’s what you signed up for, but no one gets out of an interview with John. He’ll help you ask yourself some questions, like: “Does God’s coming make a difference in my life? How can my neighbours, my kids, my co-workers, my fellow students tell that I am a follower of Jesus Christ? Do they see Jesus coming when I walk down the street? Am I good news to the discouraged; do I share my goods with the poor?”

If God’s coming is not seen in us—in the way we live unselfishly—John says we are *in* the way, not *on* the way, and we might as well let the fire burn us up completely for all we’re worth to the kingdom of God.

Strong words there. We like to think of Jesus as a sweet, tiny baby—you know, gentle Jesus meek and mild. Instead, John moves us fast-forward all the way to Judgment Day, where Jesus is working up a sweat bringing in the harvest. Like the Ghost of Christmas Future showing Scrooge the bleak outcome of his miserly ways, John shows us how we might end up like the chaff that gets swept off the floor and burned. The good wheat is safely in the bin, but we could be caught off guard, doomed for eternity because we happened to dose off during the repentance sermon.

It's no wonder this judgment talk has become so unpopular these days. Better to avoid those images of fire and brimstone, or we'll never get more people to come to church.

But if we pause long enough by John's campfire, we can understand why people didn't run away from his harsh words. For some reason the people were ready to hear what he had to say. They needed what John had. The call to repentance—*surprise!*—did not turn the people off. In fact, they wanted to know specifics. How do we bear this repentance fruit?

John didn't disappoint them, either. He said it all boils down to how you see your stuff. When you look at your closet, do you see shirts that other people really need more than you do? When you put a price on the goods or services you sell, do you try to make it fair, or do you see how much you can get away with? Are you content with what you have, or do you always have catalogues marked with the next items you plan to add to your collection? How high does your pile have to get before you call it enough? (hoarders?)

I know this makes us uncomfortable, but only because we tend to think of repentance as one more obligation, a straining toward the goal of righteousness. Repentance is not, however, a moral tune-up so we can prove something to God. Instead, it's transformation that God brings about within us. "It was never Christ's purpose to bring about self-improvement...the Word became flesh so that the same amazing life that broke into the world when Jesus Christ was born actually becomes realized in our own lives here and now." [i]

If John calls us to become holy in preparation for the Lord's coming, then we need to understand what holiness is. It's not a personal achievement. It's not something we add to our stack of possessions and responsibilities. Instead, holiness is an emptiness we allow within ourselves. It's space for God to live and to work, and where God's fire and light can have an impact on both us and others without impediments. [ii]

When the light of God shines on us, we can be honest with ourselves. The persistent light forces us to see what has to go. The fire of God's presence burns away the unnecessary. We are freed from being held back by our pet ideas, our sin...and our stuff. And let's face it, most of us have too much "stuff". I know I have.

The child in the manger will make demands on us, and John tells us we might as well get ready for that. American author, Brennan Manning puts it like this:

All the Santa Clauses and red-nosed reindeer, fifty-foot trees and thundering church bells put together, create less pandemonium than the infant Jesus when, instead of remaining a statue in a crib, he comes alive and delivers us over to the fire that he came to light.[iii]

Fortunately, John also tells us that the infant Messiah comes as a package deal, with the Holy Spirit included. Two for the price of one, as it were. Jesus calls us not only to receive and live out the righteousness he offers, he also provides the Holy Spirit to make it happen. He makes the Word of God germinate in our spirits, and by God's grace we grow and produce fruit that is abundant, with plenty to share.

As the light of God approaches, we find that it's brighter and hotter than we expected. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that God's coming is "frightening news for everyone with a conscience." [iv] Indeed, when the light of God's holiness shines upon us, we become much more aware of our sin. Yet it's not a light of judgment for the children of God. It's a light promising forgiveness and contentment, joy and peace for all who get in line for the baptism of repentance.

It's obvious that neither John nor I would encourage you to increase your purchases in these last few weeks, leading up to Christmas. But I do suggest one new item for your holiday season. Why not add the figure of John the Baptist to your nativity scene? If you can find something that resembles that eccentric prophet in the wilderness, you'll be lucky. But God's messenger will remind you that you can come close to the light and not be afraid, because God has done and is doing a true work of repentance in your soul if you allow it. He'll be a sign for you that God just wants room in your life to live there. It's no wonder we need John's unexpected message to help us get ready for the Lord's coming.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.

[i] Philip Britts, in Watch for the Light, Dec. 9 entry. Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing. 2001.

[ii] Ibid. December 20 entry by Brennan Manning. [iii] Ibid.

[iv] Ibid., December 21 entry.