

“What Kind of People Are We?”

+ 2 Advent B +

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-8

December 7, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this morning's message are the lessons for this day.

The Romans and particularly Herod Agrippa were interested in what was happening at the Jordan River because they thought John the Baptist might be starting a political movement. The Sadducees and Pharisees wondered what kind of ruckus he was raising and what theological basis there was for having God's people undergo a washing with water that was reserved for converts to Judaism. We're so used to John the Baptist, cousin of Jesus, eater of locusts and honey, mad-man living in the wilderness screaming out "Repent!" that for many people what they enjoy most about this day is getting to sing a favorite hymn, *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry* (which we'll get to in a few minutes).

If you've been raised with Advent you know that John's call for repentance has always been taken by the church as the right kind of word for Advent people to hear, though, really, who wants to hear that they need to repent - turn from a comfortable path and admit you're headed in the wrong direction and that there's something misguided about your actions and attitudes? Regardless of the age or era in which you live who really wants to repent?

The news has been difficult to listen to these past weeks. Ok, it was time to throw out my 1980's Bill Cosby inspired crazy sweaters but - well, whether he's being defamed by unfounded accusations or exposed for decades of debauchery it is disheartening. The riots in Ferguson, the "die-ins" since the announcement of no indictment in New York City - it is frightening to think this may be the start of a new "movement" in our society with greater unrest to follow. What might Christians in this nation have to repent of? One of my confirmation students from Chicago, now an African American preacher finishing his seminary education in his mid-30's has me reading all kinds of blogs and books as he is convinced we are at the beginning of a political and spiritual movement in our country. He went to a "Die-In" and then realized he'd just gotten his suit from the cleaners so he stood (as ever the brilliant and practical young man I remember).

One of the articles he pointed me to comes from *Patheos* and describes the call to repentance that Peter, author of our Epistle for today, gave in the first sermon on Pentecost – the beginning of the movement that became known of first as, “The Way” and then Christianity, “...in Acts 2 Peter says nothing whatsoever about hell. So what does he say that people need to be saved from? He tells the crowd, “Save yourself from this corrupt generation” (v. 40). And how does the cross accomplish their salvation? It causes his hearers to be “cut to the heart” (v. 37) after Peter tells the crowd that they killed their Messiah. They are saved not by being legally exonerated in some abstract heavenly courtroom, but by having their hearts mortally wounded by their implication in the murder of their king. In other words, Jesus’ cross saves them by unmasking their sin and putting it on public display in the ugliness of his brutal death.

With repentant hearts the people hearing that sermon turned their hearts (repented) and found faith and forgiveness for eternity in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were “cut to the heart.” That happens 2 other times in Acts, at the stoning of Stephen when those who followed their hatred suddenly realized they had blood on their hands and were filled with remorse. The other time was when the Sanhedrin (the ruling Pharisees) were also “cut to the heart” with the opposite result from the crowd that was saved by Peter’s sermon. The Religious Leaders are hardened into rage instead of being broken into repentance and turning to God.

So it was for those hearing John’s call to repentance in the wilderness and here we are – Advent people - preparing for the coming of the Christ, not as Bethlehem’s baby, but as humanity’s king and judge, for whom John has one and only one message: Repent!

What does that mean to us in our generation? How do we contribute to the inequality in our society, the poverty and homelessness of more refugees than the world has ever seen? More personally stated – what change of direction do you need in your life today? What “cuts to your heart” when you hear the word, “Repent?” Now we’ve already had Confession and Absolution – I don’t want you holding onto guilt – your sins are all forgiven – but think about what real change of direction you believe God is calling you to make. Strange, isn’t it that Repent is really the comforting part of John’s call – because you can repent – your sins washed away - you can change – you are forgiven. You don’t need to be afraid of the Judgment to come.

Now having said all that and recognizing that it is not just John’s generation, but every generation, that has had a whole lot of which to repent, my thoughts kept going back to one haunting question in today’s second lesson from the pen Peter the previously presented

preacher. After describing a world that is passing away and reminding his readers that the “day of the Lord” would arrive like a thief in the night, he went on to ask, “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be...” To *be*, not to *do*, because our doings, our actions, only reflect our inner being. Actions are what we do, not what we are, but they also reveal what we are. If we take John’s call to repentance seriously as Advent people, we are repenting, changing course, not for a list of bad words, bad deeds and bad thoughts; but we are repenting, turning away from, what’s inside us, what drives us, what motivates us and then turning from that lethargy, hatred, lack of concern for the oppressed and outcast to be as Christ/Christ-like in our world and in our generation..

Unlike Santa Claus making a list and checking it twice, going to find out who’s naughty or nice, St. Peter bypasses our behavior in order to reach our character, challenging us to ask **“What Kind of People Are We?”**

For Christians, the person inside is the person made new in the waters of baptism, with a heart regenerated by the work of the Holy Spirit. We are also people who wait just as the first followers waited – but not as anxiously as they who were certain that Jesus would return to them within their lifetimes, 10, 20, 30 years maybe. And when He didn’t, as the years rolled by, just as faithful believers before Jesus was born, they also began to wonder and to worry where God was and whether they’d placed their hopes in the wrong person.

They doubted, just as we do, especially when its hard to see that God’s patience has a purpose. Most of us go for the quick fix, whether it’s a broken appliance, a broken heart or a broken life. We want things put right – we want them made right without a painful societal movement or change, without a change in our church or in ourselves – can’t it just be simple? Can’t things stay as they were? Well, no, not if we truly Repent and turn from our adulterous generation.

Advent takes us in that direction not as people without hope but with great hope and with the promise that everything that is broken about us and our world is on the way to being made new; not patched or bandaged, but re-created, according to its original design.

That kind of changes things, doesn't it, when you revisit the Scripture lessons this morning with some Gospel hope in your hearts? The day of Jesus will come, as He said, as a thief in the night, but not to steal what is not his, but as a friend and lover for a long-awaited reunion.

Advent is not a time for fear, but a time of awakening of a holy passion for the person who came once as an infant to suffer and die and rise again and who will reappear to take us to Himself, to a "new heaven and a new earth....where righteousness is at home."

And now for something to send you out the door with: whether it is for Christmas or for the Christ that we are preparing, like John, we are voices crying it in the wilderness that is the world, preparing the way of the Lord and getting ready the highways of the heart for some to meet Him, perhaps for the first time in their lives. We are the Gospel with skin on. We are the public face of Jesus. We are the way that His love breaks into the wilderness and we are part of God's movement in this time to change our world by being Jesus with skin on to the poor, the oppressed – those who have no voice.

Not as prophets of doom, not as the hyper-pious who cry "repent" at the drop of a hat as though they themselves had no need of repentance. But we go as heralds of good news and comfort and hope, as God in His patience, waits for the time of His salvation. You know it. Now share it. Amen.

Now may our Lord and God stir up our hearts to prepare the way of His Son and may He strengthen us to serve Him with purified hearts and lives.