

"Well Prepared"

The Second Sunday in Advent
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

December 5, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19;
Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Hardy, read your translation of sentence number 5."

It was fourth form French, and I had not done my homework. So I did the best I could off the cuff.

"Good," said the teacher, turning his back on me and walking to the front of the class. And then he spun on his heel, turned around, eyes sparkling, and said to me, "Hardy, read me that translation again."

Inwardly I died. I couldn't remember what I had said the first time, and so I stumbled through an off the cuff translation as best I could. The teacher came up to my desk and looked down at my exercise book. The page was empty. The teacher looked at me and said, "Bluffing me eh, Hardy..." My life was in the balance. I had not done my homework. I was caught. Judgment was at hand.

The words of John were certainly appropriate for me back then, weren't they? Repent! "Repent," cries John the Baptist, to all those who came near. They were to repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand. And with the kingdom came his divine judgment.

The Jews, of course, were expecting with this kingdom a restoration of the reign of David, someone who would come among them as a great monarch and restore Jerusalem as a great nation among the peoples of the world. Repent was not the message the people were expecting to hear. John was asking the people gathered around him, those who came to hear him, to be sorrowful for the sin they had committed against God. They had offended God and they stood at great risk of being condemned by His righteous judgment.

The same is true for us and for our sinfulness. And so John asks us, through the reading of the Gospel this morning, to repent; to be deeply sorry for our offenses against God since our sins, and the sins of those of the past, were committed against Christ and so are part and parcel of Christ's suffering and death.

These are uncomfortable words for us to hear, and much more disturbing if we bother to take the time to consider them with any seriousness. For we, like the people in John's time, are called to understand the real consequences of our sinfulness. These are things we don't like to contemplate, especially when we're getting ready for Christmas and celebrating the birth of Christ. Yet it's precisely because of human sinfulness that Christ comes into the world in the first place.

We would much rather; I am sure, this morning, hear an upbeat text, sing a few Christmas carols and be merry and jovial. So, too, would the people to whom John spoke, not, of course, in terms of preparing for Christ's birth since he hadn't yet been born, but in terms of the prospect of seeing their nation reborn as something great and powerful among the peoples of the world. Why wasn't John calling them to raise a mighty army? Why wasn't he calling on the people to prepare a royal welcome for the new David? After all, John was calling with the words of Isaiah; the people were to prepare for a royal visit from the Lord. The cry that John repeats is first heard by the Israelis captive in Babylon; the call was for them to prepare to return to the holy land. And those same words echo down through long halls of time to be spoken in our hearing again, today. Just as those ancient people were called to prepare, so too were the people in John's time, and so too are we. In preparing the way of the Lord, we're asked to make his way straight and smooth. In other words, to remove all the obstacles along the way that might prevent him from coming to us.

Now John wasn't literally asking the people to become something like Penn DOT and build a new road; what he is asking them to do is to attend to their lives and living, such that God would once more be able to come to them. He was asking them to give up their self-sufficiency, to give up their independence, and most of all, to give up their presumptuous faith. The problem was, they couldn't see these things in themselves. It was only John who could see them, and when we hear John's vision as it related to these people, we're left with the question, Are we, in our time, as they were in theirs?

John immediately makes it clear what he's getting at. He turns on the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Now, these are not bad guys. To treat them as the bad guys in the Gospel is to dismiss them. They were good people. They were trying very hard to live out their faith. The Pharisees were religiously devoting themselves to practicing their faith with all the dignity they could muster and with all the correctness in their power. They believed in immortality and that one would be either eternally happy or eternally miserable after death. God, they held, was also under an obligation to bestow special favors on the people of Israel, since He had chosen them. Conformity to God's law and getting the law right was the sole justification. They were particularly careful about external cleanliness, and they indulged in all sorts of washing ceremonies.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, believed one had to serve God, since they were chosen people and that was their obligation to God, but there no such things as rewards and punishments for the way one lived one's life. People perished, they believed, as the body perished after death. In the meantime, they were just to live as God's chosen people.

John sees quite clearly how these sorts of beliefs block God from coming to the Pharisees and Sadducees, for they left no room for him, they crafted their own salvation. In John's eyes, they're vipers. Among the Jews a viper was a symbol of cunning, of wickedness, of envenomed malice. John makes it clear that the approach of the Kingdom of God will bring with it not only divine indignation, but divine punishment for those like the Pharisees and Sadducees and who have not lived as the children of God, no matter what they thought. Even claims to be descendants of Abraham, and therefore legitimately members of the chosen race, was not enough to save them from divine judgment.

And here's the point: the mistake they make is to presume they are saved. It's an error to which many faithful, particularly Lutherans, are susceptible. What is it we say? We've been saved by grace through faith. God loves us, He forgives us, He welcomes us with open arms. But as they say in the commercials, "But wait, that's not all." While all of that is true, it's also true that the response to this grace, as thankfulness for the saving work of Christ, is good works. God expects us to do good works. We have commandment obligations. Not suggestions, not maybes, not some wonderful ideas, we have commandment obligations. We have financial obligations to the community of faith – tithing in its weakest form, and everything in its strongest. And we're obliged to live as God's forgiven and forgiving people. Forgiveness for the Christian community isn't something nice to do, it's an obligation.

If any one lived presumptively, it was me. At least in fourth form French. Mr. McGuinness was our teacher – demanding, rigorous and fair, and it was his fairness to which my hope went. No, I hadn't done my homework, and Mr. McGuinness was fair and kind and forgiving, I had nothing to fear. In the heat – or should I say in the panic of the moment, I had forgotten our nickname for Mr. McGuinness – Black Mac. "Bluffing me, eh, Hardy?" he repeated as he turned to face me. And then he uttered the four terrible words, "That's worth the cane." And he signaled me to follow him to the front of the room, where in front of the class he had me bend over and put my head under the chalk ledge of the blackboard and took from the sleeve of his master's academic gown a four foot long cane about the diameter of my forefinger and applied six sickeningly painful strokes across my buttocks. Beware, John the Baptist is saying, beware of the wrath to come. And don't be so foolish as to presume.

It's a salutary and sobering warning, bringing with it the opportunity for us to evaluate the substance and quality of our faithful living. In its most basic form, our faithful living is all about relationships: relationships with God and relationships with one another. It's a cruciform life. It's as simple as that. We prove the reality of the one by the quality of the other. It was this quality which was absent from the faithful living of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They had become completely self-reliant and had no room left for a relationship with God, and this led to failed relationships with others. This, simply put, was their sin. It was their breaking of the covenant which calls in its initial elements for relationship with God and in its remaining elements calls us to relationship with one another. So when we confess our sins, what we're doing is admitting that our relationship with God and/or our relationship with others is, at best, not all it can be, or at worst, broken.

I would invite you to put aside any talk about what "I should do" or what "I ought to do", and I would invite you to especially abandon any talk about what others should do or what others ought to do, for we ourselves don't always manage to do that which we are perfectly able.

I am not always the Christian I can be. Heaven knows I'm not always the husband, the father, or the friend I should be. And I'm not always the pastor I should be. You see, you and I, we're not always the Christian people we can be, and that shouldn't be particularly surprising. So it is that our relationships with God and with others are the key to understanding, not only how faithful we are, but who we are. When we're less than we can be, we strain those relationships and break them – the Bible calls that sin, in the singular sense. What we call sins, in the plural sense, are all the many and different ways that we strain and break relationships.

The doctrine of sin is not simply old fashioned prudery that wants to deny us having fun. It's a very profound insight into our human condition. And ultimately it's a hopeful statement. It's hopeful because God is not prepared to leave us in such a mess. God wants us to have His peace, and spread His peace. God wants us to have His love, and spread His love. God wants us to receive His forgiveness, and spread that forgiveness. That's why He sent prophets to Israel. That's why He sent John to prepare the way for Jesus. And that's why in our baptism, He pours out upon us the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Rather than seeing today's Gospel as the pronouncement of a judicial sentence, let's see it for what it really is – an opportunity to start afresh, to have a new beginning, to grow in relationships with God and with one another, to grow as God's faithful people.

I grew in French class, too, although it was very painful. The evening of the day I was first caned, in spite and rage, I deliberately didn't do my French homework. And the next day – you guessed it, Black Mac caned me again. On the third day, I arrived at French class – that time with my homework done. And so it was with homework after that. From then on, I was well prepared.

Amen.