

Second Sunday of Advent
Vicar William E. Chamberlin

5:30 p.m. Saturday, December 4, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Romans 15:4–13; Matthew 3:1–12

What are some of your impressions of Advent? When I think of Advent, I think of it as a time of reflection, contemplation, meditation, anticipation and hope. So, what more could get our attention than the shrill, shrieking voice of John the Baptizer? Worse than a cell phone ringing in the middle of worship, more offensive than a loud, undisguised belch at a high society affair, in this second week of Advent, we get John the Baptist, the first century's wild man prophet crying out and it jars us out of our blissful reverie. But maybe we can give the Baptizer a pass. After all, he didn't know it was Advent. He wasn't waiting patiently to celebrate his Lord's birth. He and Jesus were nearly the same age. He was just doing the job he had been called to do.

John's words carry a mixture of hope and threat. "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Depending on your position, this is either a really good thing or a really bad thing. Everything seemed to be going along fine until John arrived on the scene. Who would have guessed that the people would flock to a guy in the wilderness wearing camel hair and eating bugs, down by the river? While we might laugh and point at John's outfit and diet, for the people of Jesus' time and even the community of faith that Matthew wrote for, this was the equivalent of wearing a nametag that read "My name is: Elijah, Prophet of God."

Then we add in the Pharisees and Sadducees showing up. Take into consideration they were two of the major Judaic sects of the time together, controlling the Temple, but they didn't necessarily get along. EXCEPT for this one time, to come out to John's baptism. Maybe there's a parallel between the Democrats and the Republicans taking on the Tea Partyers, the "upstart" party. But why didn't John bring his message right into the Temple? He may have been an outsider, out in the wilderness, but certainly, his father, Zechariah had learned of John's pending birth while serving his duty in the temple, as part of the Priestly class. John greets these religious leaders with the harshest of words,

"Who warned you?!" It almost sounds as if John feels betrayed, that his secret message in the wilderness of repentance and baptism got out to the religious leaders that he didn't want to hear. Notice that the Pharisees and the Sadducees don't even get a word in edge-wise on John. He anticipates everything they are going to say. "Who warned you? You brood of vipers!" He likens them to the most lowly, evil creature they could imagine at the time. "What did you come out here for?"

It seems to suggest that they think being a descendant of Abraham was their "golden ticket." *"Being born a Jew ensures their participation in God's covenant and salvific purposes. John's objection seems to be that they have separated this blessed identity as a descendant of Abraham from the obligations and demands of covenant."* (Warren Carter, *Matthew and The Margins*, 98) What does that mean

for us? *"The Christian equivalent of 'We have Abraham as our father' is 'We have Christ as our Savior.' While trust in Christ's salvation is a first requirement, it is not the last."* (Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, 20)

With the kingdom presumably close at hand, this is no time for posturing or relying on impotent claims of inclusion, or special status with God. Those things might work in the spheres of influence of this world but in the coming kingdom they are absolutely worthless. Although John seems to take a particularly dim view of the Jewish religious leaders. We would almost think he is challenging them and going to withhold this baptism of repentance; a repentance by the way that people were flocking to, to confess their sins. With the kingdom being imminent, right around the corner as John saw it; they wanted to make sure they were "in." Their baptism, this repentance, called them to change their ways, FOR GOOD. The baptism was an outward sign to let them know they HAD repented, they HAD confessed. Perhaps John's word, although a little harsh, are still words that we need to hear to call us to repentance. We are called to prepare, but are well called to prepare and sit in quiet contemplation? How do we make those ways straight for the Lord to break into our world? John does not have the power or authority to promise or effect salvation, but he can assure repentance

As Lutherans, more than a little comfortable with our confessional Article IV (Augsburg Confession) "justification by grace through faith," we are powerless to do anything to effect our own salvation, so we rely on Christ. With that comes a responsibility. Repentance IS still a big deal, and it's an authentic repentance, not the simple, "I'm sorry I did something wrong." This is a true change of heart and direction in lives to not go back to the ways that caused the break in relationship between each other and God.

Judgment is still coming! The birth that we so eagerly anticipate brings the HOPE of the greatest gift of love. But, it also inaugurates the beginning of the end, and starts the clock ticking towards that Final Judgment. As John says, "The ax is already at the root of the tree." It's NOT pruning. It's at the root, the source of life and nourishment, and its coming. So, be prepared. Bear GOOD fruit, fruit WORTHY of your repentance, a repentance so authentic, so genuine, that you can't help but bear the good fruit of the Christian life.

So, while Advent is a time of anticipation, longing and expectation, we are headed inevitably toward the end of the end. Our salvation in and through Christ is assured through our baptism, but we still bear the responsibility of leading genuinely repentant, Christ-centered lives.

Amen.

Copyright © 2010, William E. Chamberlin. All rights reserved.