2 Advent

December 6, 2015

In the name of the God of all Creation,

God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,

And the power of God known in the Spirit.

Amen.

This is the Second Sunday of the Church’s Advent season. In this season where we begin our liturgy with the lighting of the Advent wreath we anticipate the Feast of the Incarnation … Christmas … by bringing light to Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. This Sunday we lit the candles for Hope, and then Peace … peace in a world torn by violence.

The Second Sunday of Advent is also when we hear the story of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus. Every Second Sunday of Advent … year after year … from one of the three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke … year after year we hear this story.

I will have to admit that I had a hard time with what to preach this morning. For most of my 40 plus years in the ordained ministry I have preached about John the Baptist on the Second Sunday of Advent. But the events this week also call to me … not just the horrific assault in San Bernardino but also the response to it by politicians, the press, and others that all point to how divided a nation we are.

I cannot understand how an evangelical Christian … in the name of the one who taught that we should never respond to violence with violence … can say “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” I have a hard time reconciling the words of Jesus … in so many places in our gospels … with the justifications for a vote to continue to allow for the sale of assault weapons whose sole purpose is to shoot as many bullets as fast as it can. I have a hard time listening to those who argue against a woman’s right to choose an abortion and cite the “sanctity of life” and allow lethal weapons to be sold just about anyone who wants to buy one.

But, then I realized I am part of the problem. I can sometimes get on my “high horse” and sit in judgement of others. You’ve heard me say, “The world is divided into two kinds of people … those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those that don’t.” This is a paradoxical statement. And when my self-righteous indignation looks at another and says you are wrong … you are being hypocritical … then I have just divided the world into two kinds of people … “us” and “them.” “Us” … who read God’s Holy Scriptures about Jesus the “RIGHT” way, and “them” who read the same Holy Scripture the “WRONG” way.

As Caren reminded me, “they” are people just like you and me. They are just as confused and frightened by the world out there as I am … and possibly as many of you are. However, they have a different worldview shaped by their family, their culture, and those of influence in the world around them. Yet, they are just like you and me at the core … and when I participate in “us” and “them” thinking I fall into the very same trap that they have fallen into. And when I participate in “us” and “them” thinking I blame “them” for the ills of the world … and it puts me in the role of victim.

So on this Second Sunday of Advent what might John the Baptist have to say about all this? In a world of confusion, fear, and at time chaos what does our Holy Scriptures tell us about living our lives in Hope and Peace? It may be our take on the Holy Scriptures, and others may have a different take on the story, but the last thing I want to do is use the Bible as a tool of violence that separates me from others.

So, John the Baptist … then, 2,000 year ago … and today in our own lives as we prepared for the Feast of the Incarnation … the coming of Jesus.

John the Baptist was a PK … a Preacher’s Kid. His father was a Jewish priest who once served at the Temple in Jerusalem. John must have heard the story of his birth so many times it made him sick. The Angel Gabriel told his father, Zechariah, that his ancient and barren mother, Elizabeth, would have a child in her old age … him … John! His father didn’t believe Gabriel so the Angel struck him speechless. From as far back as he can remember John was told of all the wonderful things he was destined to do … and he hated every thought of it. Oh yes, John felt an intimate relationship with the divine presence of God … Yahweh … but the religious rituals and sacrifices of his father and the other priests, and the fancy robes and bells and incense didn’t make much sense to him. As soon as he could he left home and headed as far away from the Temple as he could get. He went to the wilderness of the Jordan River Valley.

John dressed like Elijah in a rough camel’s skin. He ate crunchy insects dipped in fresh honey. He used colorful language and showed little respect for the powerful. He announced a new world order. Could it be that this man was a genuine prophet?

The image of John the Baptist that we hear in the Gospels is a strong contrast to Christmas displays of Nativity scenes and Wise Men and Santa Claus and Reindeer and Elves. John the Baptist lived far beyond the lights of the city. He lived in the wilderness … a wilderness inhabited by wild things. This wilderness was a place outside the purview of the powerful leaders, a place where humans were tested and tried. If people wanted to "repent," to turn away from old ways of life, then they must go out, get away from home and all that controls them. There they would meet John the Baptist, confess their sins, and be baptized.

I believe this Advent season demands the same of us. Surrounded by anxiety and fear brought on by world events, and even our own self-righteous condemnation of news pundits and politicians we label “bigots” and “racist” and “outrageous,” I believe we must retreat to a wild place to be able to encounter something holy and sacred within ourselves. If we want to return to a state of expectancy in our faith, we must travel outside of the “noise” of the world around us … including the holiday sounds, sights, and social events of the season … we must travel to the place in our lives where "wild things" live in order for something new to be born.

Remarkably, in this 2,000 year old story, lots of people made that journey through the wilderness among wild things to be baptized by John the Baptist! That tells us that folks were desperate for change. Turning back to God seemed the right thing to do, especially when the preacher was announcing that God's realm was just around the corner and, in fact, would arrive any day. The climate seemed to be charged with a renewed judgment of the way of life that held them captive … not too different than our world today.

In spite of my reservations about my own self-righteous indignation of those seeking positions of power … and how that divides the world into two kinds of people … it is obvious that it did not seem to bother John the Baptist. John's message was about political and social change; he was quick to point out the wickedness of unbridled power and wealth. His message went beyond the realm of politics, however. He also preached against religious abuse and hypocrisy.

When Pharisees and Sadducees came out to the wilderness for baptism, John went ballistic! John got up in their faces and confronted them in front of all those crowds who had come out from Jerusalem and all Judea. If these religious leaders thought they could make a public display of their righteousness by being baptized by a prophet, they didn't really know who John the Baptist was. So John preached a sermon that got their attention and challenged them to consider a different path.

“You brood of vipers!" he shouted at the Pharisees and Sadducees. This insulting image of poisonous snakes confronts the arrogance of the religious leaders. He likened them to the snakes that killed the wandering Israelites in the desert under Moses' rule. He accused them of being the "lowest of the low," those who deceive and destroy.

"Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" Their arrogance presumed that they were God's best friends and favorite sons. It was easy to forget that God had chosen Abraham and his descendants as God's own people, and God could choose Gentiles to join the family just as easily. In fact, John said that God could take a dead rock and make it a living heir of the promise, if that's what God wanted to do.

"Good fruit" seemed to be what God was looking for from the tree that took root in Judea. The message is clear in John's sermon: how we live our lives makes a difference. How life is lived in relation to others is the truest measure of a person's character and identity. This … to me … is the lesson John preached 2,000 years ago that still has power in today’s world. For the Pharisees and Sadducees, the proof of their repentance would be demonstrated by a radical embrace of humility, generosity, and acceptance of others, especially the poor, the outcasts, and those outside the Jewish community. For me … and the way I understand these Holy Scriptures … the repentance called for in this season of Advent … in our world today … is the same. That repentance would be demonstrated by a radical embrace of humility instead of arrogance, of generosity instead of self-serving behaviors , and acceptance of others, especially the poor, the outcasts, and those outside of what we might consider “our” community … not just an acceptance but a welcome to refugees of all kinds.

This John the Baptist was in the wilderness, not Jerusalem. He wore a rough coat of camel’s hair pulled tight with a leather belt, not the refinements of a priest. And he ate locust and wild honey like the prophet Elijah before him. This John was obviously anti-establishment. He was outside the box. And he was the precursor of Jesus.

Make no mistake about it, the story of John’s counter-culture life as a prelude to the life, ministry, and death of Jesus is meant to tell us something. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously this is not going to be life as usual.

We are just three weeks away from celebrating the birth of Jesus. The Feast of the Incarnation is one of the two holiest days in our faith. Yet Christmas has become an institution in its own right both within the Church and within our social environment. It is as if the symbol has lost its power. If all we do is celebrate Christmas as an end in itself, then we clearly miss the point. However, if we understand it as the birth of something radically different in the life of the world, and in our own lives, we can grasp this holiday as truly a holy and sacred day and encounter God in the midst of it.

***In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”***

It is this repentance of which John proclaims that makes the difference. As many of you know, the Greek word translated here is *metanoia,* meaning “turn around.” However, this isn’t just about changing one’s behavior; it is much, much deeper than that. It is **NOT** just about stopping doing sinful things and acting righteously, although that may happen.

It **IS** about becoming who God made you to be, and to do that one has to give up, to turn away from, that which keeps us from living in the image of God.

I believe that all humans are all born innocent and blessed. Deep within us is the image of God wanting to become whole. Deep within our souls is the seed of divine life waiting to blossom. Our spiritual ancestors, sages and prophets all point us in the direction of wholeness; that is the most basic essence of our Holy Scriptures. Yet, generations after generation we miss the mark. We seek wholeness and we come up short. We yearn to live in the image of God and fear gets in the way.

John the Baptist, who was way outside the box of conventional wisdom, was proclaiming a “turning around” … *metanoia* … of one’s heart and soul as a means to finding that true image of God alive within one’s own life. And the story of John the Baptist is our introduction to the birth of Jesus.

Knowing the story of John the Baptist can teach us something about how we might prepare, and where we have to go to get ready. John could have remained within the security of his family’s identity of ancestral priesthood. John could have lived in the safety of his hometown. But he embraced the unconventional which took him into the wilderness. He countered the rituals of the religious institution with a baptism in a river. He supplanted the sacrifice of the Temple with the act of repentance … of *metanoia* … of turning from an old life to a new life aimed at living in God’s image. And people flocked to John the Baptist, including Jesus.

As we prepare for this Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, the divine presence of God coming alive in each of us, let us listen to John. It may mean going into the wilderness, because you won’t find him in the temples of our world. It may mean listening to an unconventional wisdom, because the conventional wisdom will continue to point you on the same path you have always been on. And it will mean repentance … *metanoia* … turning around. It will mean letting go of fears that keep you from allowing the image of God to blossom within you. It will mean looking at our lives in a new way. The image of God is within us waiting to come alive.

I cannot control the behaviors of others … it is hard enough to control my own. But if … at the core … all human beings are children of a loving God, then I am called to see that goodness in them, in spite of whatever differences there may be between us. “They” are not to blame for the ills of the world. And I am a “victim” only if I allow myself to be a victim. I can hope during this Advent. I can pray for peace. And I can take responsibility for my own behavior that contributes to this polarized world. If I can “turn around” and enter the wilderness where the wild things are, then maybe … just maybe … I can find room for something holy and sacred to be born in me at Christmas.

Let us be prepared for the Feast of the Incarnation, not just as a remembrance of an event of the past, but as a reality of the divine image of God coming alive in our world today. We need it … the world needs it.

Amen.