**3 Advent**

**December 13, 2015**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus**

**And the power of God known in the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen.**

In 2003 Rabbi Robert Levine wrote a book, “There is No Messiah, and You’re It.” He begins the first chapter with a story of a Seder that his synagogue shared with a neighboring Baptist church … a Christian denomination learning about and participating in a Jewish ritual. At the Seder a ten year old girl approached Rabbi Levine and asked him why no one had been drinking from one of the cups of wine. “We leave the cup,” Rabbi Levine explained, “hoping that Elijah will come down from Heaven and join our Seder. That is why we leave the door open.”

The young girl then asked, “Why do you want Elijah to come?”

Rabbi Levine answered, “Because we believe that when Elijah comes, he will announce the coming of the messiah.” Rabbi Levine then continued, “You know how Jesus was sent by God to tell everyone how to live?”

“Uh-huh.” The girl replied.

“And you believe the Jesus will come again to make the world a better place? Well, Jewish people don’t believe that Jesus was the messiah, and we are still hoping the messiah will come into the world real soon.”

The little girl was somewhat more inquisitive than Rabbi Levine anticipated and asked, “And you do this every year … open the door for Elijah and hope the messiah will come right after?”

“Yes, exactly” replied Rabbi Levine.

“And you hope the messiah will make a better world?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you still waiting? Why don’t you just do it yourself?”

This past Friday a number of people from St. Cyprian’s went to see the musical Godspell at Players-By-The-Sea in Jacksonville Beach. The opening number is John the Baptist singing the words we heard in last week’s gospel reading from Luke, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” They are actually words from the prophet Isaiah, and they are an expression of the yearning of the Jewish people for a messiah … an anointed one … to come and make the world a better place. Even our lessons this morning recount that longing … even if it is expressed in a rather odd way.

Last week I preached about John the Baptist … and here he is again … John the Curmudgeonly Baptist. On this Third Sunday of Advent it seems as if John the Baptist is the bearded killjoy of Christmas. "You brood of vipers!" he shouted across the wilderness "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Remember, according to Luke, great crowds streamed into the desert to get yelled at by John. The question is “Why?” Why were they willing … even eager … to hear his fire-and-brimstone preaching? What attracted them?

I believe the first clue lies in the question they asked John at the conclusion of his sermon. "What should we do?" That's not a question people ask when things are going well. It's the question we ask when we are facing overwhelming challenges. This is the question we ask when the received wisdom has failed, when our cherished defenses are down, when our lives are splitting at the seams … when we are confused and fearful. It's what we ask when we're weary, bored, disillusioned, or desperate. "What should we do?"

John's answer also provides our second clue. Imagine him if you will … a wild beast of a man, dressed in camel’s hair and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey. The description of John’s very appearance tells us that he is someone who lives on the margins of society … geographically and otherwise. What did the crowds think such a fringe character would say in answer to their question? Abandon your homes and families? Dwell in the desert? Reject your culture? Start a revolution?

Given John's demeanor, my guess is that the crowds might very well have expected such radicalism. But the answer he gave them was even more radical … so radical we stand in danger of missing it: What should you do? You should go home.

Go home to your families, your neighbors, your vocations, your colleagues. Stop fleeing. Stop insisting that God is somewhere else, somewhere far away from the grit and sweat of your nights and days. Stop looking in churches and at holy people to give you the answer. Instead, inhabit the stuff of your lives as deeply and as generously as you can … there is no messiah and you are it. Your messiah is closer than you think. Inhabit your life, no matter how plain, how obscure, how unglamorous. Why? Because the holy ground that matters most is the ground right beneath your feet.

To the tax collectors, he said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the mercenaries: "Don't extort money by threats or false accusations; be satisfied with your wages." To the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Don't allow your religious heritage to make you arrogant or complacent." To everyone who had anything he told them, "You have gifts to give. So, share them."

What John was daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the ethereal and mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for a life in God’s image are embedded in the lives God has already given us. We don't have to look "out there." The kingdom of heaven is here, within and among us.

If this is true then we have work to do — work so ordinary, it will almost definitely disappoint us.

Remember, we are supposed to call John's exhortation "good news" … that is what the word “gospel” means. In fact, I think it can be. If you're one who believes that your life … your family, your heritage, your vocation, your future … is somehow outside the realm of God … then what John has to say can be good news indeed. It says God is right here … intimately close. John is saying that the messiah is coming, but get ready for it by finding the holy and sacred in your own life … in everything you do … everywhere you go. Everything in your life matters to God. Nothing in it is beyond redemption. Nothing.

On the other hand, if your tendency is to ignore the exhortation, or discount it, or run away from it … if the life you have is not the life you want or even want to want … then John's good news might feel like something stabbing your soul. To tell the truth, I come to this passage with some ambivalence. I feel relief on the one hand, but I also feel sorrow. Some days, I'm ready to inhabit my life in the ways John suggests. Some days, all I want to do is run.

At the beginning of this liturgy we lighted three candles on our Advent wreath … the first for hope, the second for peace, and the third for joy. This Third Sunday of Advent is noted as a Sunday of joy … in spite of the less than joyful sermon John preached in the wilderness.

Earlier in this sermon I called John the Baptist a curmudgeon, but here's an ironic little fact: John the Baptist is the patron saint of spiritual joy. At the beginning of Luke’s gospel there is the story of John’s mother and father. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, we deeply faithful people and had prayed long and hard that they might have a child, but the couple was childless. Then, while Zechariah was tending the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, the angel Gabriel came to Zechariah, and promised him that Elizabeth would bear a child. In due time Elizabeth was pregnant. Then, in the six month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, Mary … the mother of Jesus … came to visit her kinswoman, and while John the Baptist was still a fetus in his mother’s womb he leapt at the presence of Mary and Jesus. John’s joy preceded Jesus. This is why John the Baptist is the patron saint of spiritual joy.

But clearly, as John matured, he understood something hard and flinty about joy. Joy is not sentiment. Joy is not happiness. The fact is that joy will cost you. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," John told the crowds who flocked to him in the Judean wilderness. Bear fruit … bring it forth. But also, bear it … carry it, shoulder it, endure it.

As we anticipate the birth of Jesus, the one we Christians call the Anointed On … the Messiah … how is it that we prepare for the birth of holiness within our own lives. It is easy to celebrate the holiday as an event out there … something that happened in the past … something that was done for us as if we are passive observers. But the girl in Rabbi Levine’s story had it right, “Then why are you still waiting? Why don’t you just do it yourself?”

If the messiah is to come alive in this world, he/she will come alive in each of us when we feed the hungry … those who hunger for nourishment of their bodies and nourishment for their souls. The messiah will come alive in us when we cloth the naked … those who are vulnerable to the physical weather and the weather of our society. The messiah will come alive in us when we give drink to those who are thirsty, and visit those in prisons of all kinds, and when we welcome the stranger … especially those who have been marginalized, and disenfranchised, and discarded by the world.

In less than two weeks we will celebrate the birth of Jesus as the Anointed One … the Messiah of our faith. John the Baptist is announcing that event … but he is doing it by telling the people they have to prepare. They have to prepare by realizing that the joy they will know comes with the price of living life from the holiness that is within all of us. This is the God that is alive in Jesus. It is also the God that is alive in each one of us … just waiting to be born.

Open your hearts to the messiah that is within you … something new just might be born in you this Christmas.

Amen