

Sermon: The Rev. Canon Timothy Dombek
2 Advent C Dec 6, 2009

Baruch 5:1-9; Canticle 16;
Phil. 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6
All Saints', *Phoenix, AZ*

It seems to come a little earlier every year.

This year it happened with my son on an outing to our local Ace Hardware.

It was September, and we were on a mission to repair a screen for our kitchen window, mind you, when we entered the store and were assaulted with long tables of items for sale, all of them related in one way or another to—Christmas.

Here we stood, more than a month away from Halloween, and Christmas things were for sale at the Ace Hardware. I entered the store with the coming cooler fall days on my mind, when we could open the windows and not run the air conditioner, and enjoy the fresh air and balmy afternoons and evening, only to be run over by a reindeer, nine of them in fact, among other colored lights, Christmas displays, and a plastic fish wearing a Santa cap that when you pushed a button sang an awful Christmas song.

Even my sixteen-year-old son, whose speech delay makes him a man of few words, was moved to say, “Goofy” when the fish sang.

Intellectually, I know why we do this.

In a consumer based economy and culture, such as ours, selling things generates profits, and profits become wages, and wages buy things, in a kind of dollar-based “water cycle” that, like spring rains, water our economy and makes things grow.

In the current economic climate, as we try to pull it out of its nosedive back to a proper “flying attitude”—or in this case, literally, a buying attitude—

I can understand trying to jump start the Christmas buying season by pushing up the start date a little, even if it is 90 days or more before Christmas.

But maybe there is something additional this year, if only a desire for a return of that Christmas feeling sooner to lift drooping spirits (in addition to lackluster profits).

I think people rush the start of what we prematurely call “the Christmas season” because they just want to feel better, think about better times, and maybe even reach out and change the lives of some people who are feeling down and out and have no hope for Christmas, especially this year.

Yet for the Church, it is only Advent,
and in stark contrast to this cultural rush to Christmas,
we hear a voice crying in the wilderness, as he does every year,
proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

This voice strikes us as odd, almost dissonant,
as if someone were singing off key; “Hey Buddy, lighten up,”
we are tempted to say. “Christmas is coming, be of good cheer.”

But can't you hear it?

To listen carefully to John is to hear a message of good cheer,
for he is telling us that One is coming who is going to lift
the hopes of everyone, of all flesh, the totality of humankind.
And nearly two thousand years later,
his message of hope still needs to be fully & deeply heard
in our streets and lanes, in our houses and homes.

Has John the baptizer become so familiar to us
that we fail to hear what he is actually saying?
What comes to mind when we see him appear in the text,
hear him rant and rave to repent?

Some of us find it hard to resist images of a long-haired,
bearded weirdo, wearing strange clothes,
uttering unintelligible (or unimaginable) things,
images reinforced by cartoon comic strips, movies,
and editorial cartoons depicting end-of-the-world
prophets and doomsayers.

But in actuality, John isn't a doomsayer.
He is a hope giver,
and his message is one of incredible good news!

In John's day and age, in that time and place, the wilderness was
where people went regularly for spiritual encounters,
for miracles and visions,
for enlightenment or instruction in holiness,
and a place for living a rule of life,
either in community or in solitary quarters.

Religious communities thrived in the desert in the early first century,
with some communities more formally organized than others.

After his own baptism,
we see Jesus going in to the desert to discern clarity and purpose.

And in this heady and enriched environment,
John received the word of God.
John caught a vision,
a glimpse of a future that God had in mind,
and it changed John's expectations,
his present reality, and the course of his life.

The Word from God John received was this:

No longer must people go to the proper religious institution in the proper location with the proper gift required by the occasion (and the Law) in order to receive forgiveness of sins.

God will forgive their sins right here right now,
just wash them away, as the water of baptism symbolically does what God promises to actually do.

God forgives you, and asks you to forgive others, as well.
This forgiveness on offer by God is the Good News that John proclaims, and it still brings hope.

To speak of filling valleys and lowering mountains,
of straightening that which is crooked,
and smoothing out the road that is rough
is to breathe hope into people who feel marginalized
by a world of unassailable mountains and crooked paths,
who live under a system designed to
enrich those loyal to the powerful and
to further keep the downtrodden down.

To forgive oneself and one another is to
level and smooth those uneven and rough areas of our personal lives.
And experiencing forgiveness is tied to extending forgiveness;
“forgive us our sins—our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,”
we say in the Lord’s Prayer.

Forgiveness is a form of repentance;
forgiveness is to change our mind about a situation that
we have been hanging on to.

It is to let go of it,
to forgive others or that person for whom we harbor disdain,
it is to let go of hate,
to leave judgment to God,
to replace the part of our heart that has turned
to stone with living, feeling-enriched flesh again.

Forgiveness is to free others, and ourselves,
from the bondage of sin.

Sin is anything that keeps us from
a right relationship with God and our neighbor;
when we recognize that things aren’t how they should be,
and realize this internally, then we know we have sinned.

The first step toward changing our minds about the sin in our lives
is to actually see the sin for what it is.

To borrow a phrase from Twelve-step recovery groups,
it is to admit “we are powerless” over other people
“and that our lives have become unmanageable.”

The next step is that ‘we came to believe that
a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to wholeness.’”

This is the change of mind and heart that repentance requires.

It is the change of mind and heart that John the Baptist
calls us to perform year-after-year.

And in admitting our sins,
and changing our minds and our hearts,
we experience the hope that forgiveness brings,
a hope that lives within us.

Without embracing forgiveness there is no true repentance,
no true changing of heart and mind.

Loving our neighbor as ourselves is impossible without forgiveness,
both in forgiving others and forgiving ourselves.

In fact, practicing forgiveness is the church’s true job,
according to Robert Farrar Capon.
In his book, *Hunting the Divine Fox*, he writes
(and forgive me for the lengthy excerpt!):

The church is not in the morals business. The world is in the morals
business, quite rightfully; and it has done a fine job of it, all things consid-
ered.

The history of the world’s moral codes is a monument to the labors of
many philosophers, and it is a monument of striking unity and beauty. As
C.S. Lewis said, anyone who thinks the moral codes of mankind are all
different should be locked up in a library and made to read three days’
worth of them. [One] would be bored silly by the sheer sameness.

What the world cannot get right, however, is the **forgiveness** business—
and that, of course, is the church’s real job. She is in the world to deal
with the sin which the world cannot turn off or escape from. She is not in
the business of telling the world what’s right and what’s wrong so that it
can do good and avoid evil. She is in the business of offering, to a world
which knows all about that tiresome subject, *forgiveness* for its chronic
unwillingness to take its own advice. But the minute that she even hints
that morals, and not forgiveness, is the name of her game, she instantly
corrupts the Gospel and runs headlong into blatant nonsense.

The church becomes, not Ms. Forgiven Sinner, but Ms. Right. Christian-
ity becomes the good guys in here, the bad guys out there. Which, of
course, is pure tripe. The church is nothing but the world under the sign
of baptism (pp. 132-133).

“The church is nothing but the world under the sign of baptism.”

And what does it mean for us to live under the sign of baptism?
Why, it is the answer, “I will, with God’s help”
sincerely given to five easy questions:

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin,
repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example
the Good News of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,
and respect the dignity of every human being?

Living under the sign of baptism is to live as a symbol
of God's love come into the world, especially relevant
as we approach the coming of Jesus as a child, being born unto us,
and within us, once again, in about a fortnight.

This Advent season,
in the midst of the weather turning cooler,
even with the "Holiday season" coming earlier and earlier,
and even as our days grow busier with shopping
and decorating, and going to parties
we are called to remember

that there is a man standing in the wilderness calling us
calling us to change,
to change our minds,
to change our hearts,
to change our lives.

And so we pray,

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets
to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation:
Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins,
that we may greet with joy
the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer...

Advent's call to repentance is a call to each one of us to forgive,
to experience forgiveness anew,
and to live forgiveness as Good News
to a world desperately in need of good news.