

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Advent III

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Luke doesn't begin today's gospel story with nice, cuddling or affectionate words. He launches into the people with a kind of verbiage which is meant to prick their minds and to offer them the chance to re-examine themselves. Remember, Socrates once said "an unexamined life is not worth living", and so as jarring as John's opening remarks may have been, the response of John's hearers reflects a desire to turn over a new leaf.

John's hearers lived in a culture that was self-absorbed with itself because of the unique claims about its lineage and heritage. Oftentimes there is a sense of stupor that consumes people in such a way that they become unaware of themselves and their own deeds.

In his condemnation of the people, John evokes a significant figure in Jewish cultural and religious heritage-Abraham. As you may remember, God called Abraham and established a covenantal relationship with him that He will be their God, and Abraham and his descendants, who will be as many as the stars of the sky and the sand at the shore, will be His people.

And so for generations, the descendants of Abraham looked on the covenant as the centerpiece of their identity. Jewish religious life and practice evolved around the covenant. Quite apart from the ritual participation inherent in keeping the covenant, one only had to be born by a Jewish mother to lay a claim to being a part of the covenant, and enjoy the benefits that came with it. By virtue of their birth, faith or the heritage of faith was passed on from one generation to another.

But the gift that came freely by birth also created a community of people who became insulated to the extent that all they cared about was their ritual responsibility in making good on the covenant and not their responsibility to even those who were part of the covenant.

The covenant itself was hopeful and the promise was secured. But instead of the liberty that the promise of the covenant offered, John speaks to a people who were either trapped in a complete misunderstanding of what the covenant meant or a people who were unaware of the depth of their sin-sins which were cloaked in indifference.

I once heard a story of three teenagers in Wilmington, NC. They heard that a Civil Rights march was to be held on Main Street. They decided to go to the march, not to participate in the march but to see what this was all about. When they arrived at the march, they saw both African Americans and Whites holding placards and marching.

For whatever reason, they could not fathom why there was a march, what are these people marching for? They asked themselves. What was wrong with the society that these people were marching to correct? In their little minds, all was perfect, all was alright-and so why are these people disturbing the peace?

But when you live in a cocoon, you either fail to recognize or you fail to appreciate the limits to which you have subjected yourself.

Many years thereafter, one of the three reflected on this experience and remarked that we are sometimes so blinded by our sins that we become unaware of the depth of those sins and the extent to which we have been crippled by those sins.

If I am unaware of my sins, I cannot seek redemption. If I am unaware of my failings, I cannot seek renewal, if I am unaware of my shortcomings, I cannot seek fulfillment. Being aware of my sins means that I can seek the salvation which does not destroy me but transforms the old me into a new me.

What Luke seeks to have John do in today's gospel story is to raise the level of awareness of his hearers. Not that the message was any different from the prophetic messages of old, no it was not.

What was different this time was, John makes the claim that in fact their ties to the covenant, which had always provided a cover, as important as those ties may be, they will not in and of themselves be sufficient enough to satisfy the new reality which God is about to inaugurate.

To further illustrate the discontent, John argues, that not only can God raise stones to offer praise which will be unlike their empty praise, but God had basically moved on, and He has inaugurated a new dispensation which will be spearheaded by the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

In their dismay and fretfulness, they asked "What then shall we do?" John in his answer doesn't prescribe heroic acts or ritual performance or any act that might prove to be impossible or tasking to render. He simply asked them to be aware, share-however little you may have, be fair and just in your dealings with others and to only take that which is your due.

In other words, although they were still tied to the old, the demand is to participate in a new reality that commands nothing more than being aware of the needs of others. When I was growing up in my little city in Ghana, I lived about half a block from a former slave fort-Fort Orange. I could see the fort from my house.

But all I knew about that fort was that it was a lighthouse, a lighthouse which offered navigational aid to ships. Over the years I thought hard and deep about this slave fort turned into a lighthouse, and I said to myself, that light often springs up from the darkest places of human life.

The symbolism of the slave fort having been turned into a light house reminds me that darkness cannot take hold over us forever, that indeed it is God who saves us; the God who saves us is the God who brings light into the darkness of our lives and the darkness of the world.

And so Paul can encourage the people of Phillipi to rejoice. Rejoice because light has come into the world. Rejoice because the separation caused by sin and darkness has been overcome by human reunion with God made possible through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Rejoice because God has restored our fortunes by taking His judgments away from us.

Rejoice because we ourselves have experienced a kind of resurrection which produces a new being—a being who has the power to create life out of death. In my mind, resurrection is not a future event yet to be experienced, but a present reality which simply means that the resurrected is now aware, aware not only of himself but of others.

Advent is frightful but also pregnant with hope. Frightful in the sense that we come face-to-face with our brokenness, and hopeful because we eagerly await a savior who makes us whole with the gift of self-awareness.

Thank God we do not have to engage in any heroic acts to show our new sense of awareness. And so as you wait to celebrate the coming savior, I need you to make my day. Make my day by sharing the life you have freely received. If you have two coats, make my day by giving one away. Make my day with a renewed passion to seek justice wherever it may be found. Make my day by lifting up the lowly and downtrodden. Make my day by opening up your arms wide enough to welcome the total stranger. Make my day with your new sense of awareness. Amen.