

Sermons at Saint Paul's

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

The Second Sunday of Advent/December 6, 2009

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” The wilderness is a place of chaos, an abode of wrong. No one wants to be in the wilderness if they can help it. John, however, goes straight into the wilderness, the place of disorder, in order to make God's re-ordering known. John was preparing people. What has been out of kilter will be put right. It will take realignment, what John calls repentance.

We all have some experience of this wilderness, of things being out of kilter. *Time Magazine* this week called the decade now ending the worst since the conclusion of World War II. The decade was marked by financial loss, violent disorder and extremism. Hallmark Cards has quintupled the number of Christmas cards this year in the category of “difficult times.” One card confides, “This wasn't the year any of us hoped for.” When John proclaims a baptism for repentance in the *wilderness* region of the Jordan, we all know the terrain.

Our God is an active God, especially in the wilderness. Malachi uses two transformational images. First, God's action is like a refiner's fire. Trying to imagine what such a fire might be like, I thought of the old lime kilns that you can see down on Germantown Pike. Those kilns would have to reach a temperature of 1800 degrees Fahrenheit for the refining process to work. Those old refiners would have understood the terrifying blast of God's energy, untouchable, unapproachable. Vaclav Havel, former President of the Czech Republic, wrote that we get hope from “elsewhere.” Hope comes from that which is beyond us, from an energy like an unapproachable refiner's fire. Because God is a power beyond what we can hold or touch, God generates hope.

Secondly, God is like fuller's soap. The soap is more like an alkaline cleaner than a bath bar. It was used to clean wool, removing dirt and farm debris. The soap

was extremely caustic and the process smelly. Here the human person was involved in transformation with all one's sensibilities. Our senses reel. We are totally immersed in the process. Sometimes coming to faith is like this. God is that cleansing soap that can rub us raw. John the Baptist can be caustic. He addresses the crowd that comes to him, "You brood of vipers." He is rubbing out the debris, the neglect, and smell of greed. This is the process of conversion, of turning from selfishness to faith in God. It is hands-on. We are immersed in it.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Philippians, was in the wilderness of imprisonment. What sustained him was that he was not alone. He was part of what he calls a "sharing," a community or partnering in the gospel. This sharing between one and another is upheld by the widest possible community of God's compassion. Paul's prayer is that this compassion of Christ Jesus overflow more and more so that love is shared. God is the hope generating energy of a refiner's fire, the cleansing faith of a fuller's soap, and the companionable love from which not one of us can ever be separated.

This hope, faith and love are God's work. Our work is to prepare ourselves and others for it. John the Baptist's work was to prepare human history for the incarnation, the embodiment of God's fiery, cleansing, partnering compassion in the person of Jesus. John knew that this would entail a transformation of heart. It would mean turning from sins and being restored to unity with God. John called it a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." With this came freedom from loss. It was a way out of the disorder of wilderness. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles shows the early church about the same business, announcing Jesus' kingdom with the healing of the sick, and through repentance preparing the way for Jesus' coming at the end when all things will be restored to unity with God.

Our work in Advent is to prepare the way, to prepare people so that they may encounter and follow Jesus. The first piece of work we have to do is raise people's sights. The wilderness is not all there is. There is something more beyond the disorder that stretches to the horizon. The horizon is nothing except the limit of our sight. Beyond what we can approach, "elsewhere" as Havel claimed, is the hope-generating energy of God. Our work in Advent is to pay attention to one another's yearnings.

Our second piece of work is to remind people of God's faithfulness. God has not forgotten us. Christmas is the celebration of the faithfulness of God. God is so true to us that God became one of us. God has entered into our world in the person of Jesus. The Son of Man met wilderness, disorder, even death itself and proved that compassion is stronger. Our work in Advent is to help people remember the faithfulness of God.

Our final task is to come along side others and be present to them. This sounds simple and yet it is difficult. I have to admit that I have not been very present this week. I went to a meeting in town on Tuesday to find out that it was to be held the next day on Wednesday. On Wednesday Fr. Bob Bazzolli and I were at the fire house for the dedication of a plaque honoring Captain Louis Mortimer. Bob had thought the service was to have been the day before. We both agreed that to be present we need to slow it down a bit and to be centered. It takes some intentionality at a busy time to do that. It is part of our Advent work.

The word of God comes to us in the wilderness as it did to John the Baptist. The Christmas cards that reflect the disorder of our time may actually be truer to the season than the nostalgic ones so prevalent before. Jesus' birth brings God's compassion to a world that is out of kilter. Since that day there is a great realignment going on of which we are a part. Our task is to be present to one another in joy and sorrow. In both those settings we are to raise each other's sights to the God who is beyond, and whose presence gives rise to hope. Finally, in Advent we are given the ministry of being reminders. We remind one another of God's faithfulness. We celebrate the Eucharist in remembrance that Jesus gave of himself in love for the life of the world. We live into Christmas knowing that God does not forget those whom God came into the world to save.

Amen.