

Reflection for December 6, 2020

Second Sunday of Advent

The Forerunner

We place our hope in God.

We sing of a life beyond life and a future good beyond imagining: a new heaven and a new earth, the end of sorrow, pain, and tears, Christ's return and life with God, the making new of all things.

We yearn for the coming of that future, even while participating in eternal life now.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

God, we are confident you are coming, bringing a world where all will be made right. Calm our anxiety, strengthen our patience, and keep our hope aflame, as we work towards, and wait for, your new day. Amen.

Advent is a season for new beginnings and fresh perspectives on God invading history on our behalf. It is the season of longing to experience God's presence in new ways. We wait expectantly for the light of Christ to come anew to illumine our way, wherever the way may lead.

Here are the opening words of Saint Mark's Gospel: The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way." All four New Testament Evangelists agree: there is no good news, no *gospel* of Jesus Christ, without John the Baptist. John's whole life was lived with but one purpose; he was born, a man of destiny, to declare the imminent arrival of the coming Messiah.

I can't count the number of times that I've preached about John the Baptist, and yet, though I find him more and more fascinating, I also find him more and more uncanny and intractable. John has never been fully understood, and after two thousand years, he still stands there, irreducibly strange, gaunt and unruly, lonely and refractory, utterly out of sync with his age or our age or any age. John's character, however, was never the central focus, even for the early church. Though his person is remarkable by any standard, it is not his person that marks him out; it is his *role*. In some ways John is the epitome of Advent: a figure in whom the past and the future meet in an explosive message for the present. John may be called to waiting, but his waiting can hardly be called passive; John's is an abrasive, disruptive, unsettling waiting—a waiting that is about as active as it is possible to be. "John the Baptist stands at the edge of the universe. Advent looks, not to the birth of a baby, but to the long-anticipated day of the Lord when the old age of Sin and Death will pass away. The new day of the righteousness of God is coming and is founded in eternity. The old aeon is ruled by the spirit of rebellion against God; in the coming kingdom of God there will be no need to rebel, because there will be perfect freedom. God sent John the Baptist into the world at the appointed time to announce the imminent arrival of such a deliverance. *Fall on your knees*" (Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once & Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, p. 289)!

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Preparing the way for the coming of the Lord is not going to be easy for you and me. It means laying ourselves open to God's great leveling operation. It means relinquishing our most cherished strategies and defenses. It means being ready to relinquish one's own special privileges in the world on behalf of those who might be very different from oneself. "John the Baptist stands as an example

to us of one who is prepared, in all humility, to recognize that he is not the center but the periphery; not the attraction but the signpost to the attraction; not the Light but the one who helps others to see the Light. The waiting we do at Advent reminds us of the importance of taking up John's baton of witness and passing it on, and of reorienting ourselves outward from the center of our lives so there is room enough for Jesus in the core of our being" (Paula Gooder, *The Meaning Is In The Waiting*, p. 100).

Does he understand what he has proclaimed? Does he comprehend who Jesus really is? Does he, in fact, know that he stands between the old and the new? He clearly discerns that God's kingdom is at hand, that something different is on its way, that Jesus is the one who will bring in this difference. But is that all, or does he gain a glimpse of a world transformed and made new in Jesus? John was who he was and, more importantly, he was who he was called to be. He stood, waiting, between the old and the new, because that was what God called him to do and, perhaps, in that waiting he found meaning. Advent, more than any other season of the year, is tuned to Christian life in this world as it is lived between suffering and hope.

Edward Schillebeeckx, the distinguished Dutch theologian issues this stirring challenge to the church: "It will have struck you that Mark draws out attention to the historical appearance of Jesus in our world by an eccentrically dressed young man with the 'hair shirt' characteristic of a prophet (Zech. 13:4) and the 'leather girdle' typical of Elijah (II Kings 1:7-8): in other words a fool. By contrast, Jesus, the all-important figure, makes an unobtrusive appearance, in the usual clothes of the ordinary person of his time. You could very well pass him by, had there not been this unusual man to point a finger at him. Jesus' coming to and among us is so unobtrusive that he could remain unknown in our history were we not constantly, time and again,

endlessly, to proclaim him and point a finger at him (perhaps being rejected by the world, like the Baptist, as crazy). That is the reason why the church exists and it is also the task for our ministry and for all Christians in their lives: to do what the prophet Isaiah and what John the Baptist did. For God is always a God who is to come—that is God's name and nature—always in a different and a new way according to the different circumstances in which we live" (God Among Us, p. 7).

God therefore always needs humble and yet daring forerunners. Even now.

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