

Deep Blessings

Sermon for December 8, 2019

2nd Sunday of Advent

by Pr. Bea Chun

St. Francis Lutheran Church



A voice cries in the desert: Prepare the way of our God!

Matthew 3:3

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come:

Today we observe the 2nd Sunday of Advent. In the tradition of the Lutheran Church and many liturgical traditions this is the Sunday when we hear about John the Baptist: a voice crying in the wilderness.

Can you picture him? Clothed in rags and something made of camel's hair, wandering and preaching in the desert? Actually, it was not just any desert, it was the Judean desert, a place I remember well from my trip to the Holy Land a few years back.

The Judean Desert was one of my favorite places. I found it enchanting, mysterious, and deeply spiritual. A landscape full of contradictions: On the one hand, it is a desert, a harsh and arid environment. But it also has many little streams which come down from the Judean hills and flow toward the Dead Sea. And over time these little creeks and streams have carved many green canyons into the desert, and these green canyons offer a delightful contrast to the harsh desert.

And in this magical place there appeared John the Baptist, and he proclaimed: "Change your hearts and minds! The Kingdom of heaven is near!"

Many people from all over the region, from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and from the whole region around the Jordan came to him. And they confessed their sins, and John baptized them in the river Jordan.

Why? Why did John the Baptist offer such a baptism? And why did so many people come? And why did they confess their sins to him?

Why go all the way into the desert? Why not go to the temple? After all, the temple was the proper place for the forgiveness of sin. Twice a day the temple priests offered prayers and sacrifices. And the people could bring offerings in the form livestock or food, and these offerings, the livestock and the food, were then scarified to God, and this was the official and established way in which sins forgiven.

So, then why go out into the desert? Why go to John and not the priests in the temple? Why seek an immersion in the river instead of bringing livestock for an offering?

Because something had gone wrong with the temple. Some said that the priests had become corrupt. Others said that the temple had become polluted. Others said that the sacrifices were no longer performed in accordance with the scriptures.

I could go into great theological and historical details about the various arguments that people had at that time, about the temple and the sacrifices and what worked and what didn't. But instead, I want to switch to our own experience with our own faith practices. At the heart of many faith traditions, there are practices and rituals that are meant to bring us closer to God. In our Lutheran faith, for instance, we have sacraments, prayers, and liturgies. When these sacraments and rituals are approached with reverence, with meaning and intention, they can be very powerful; they can bring us into a deep and mysterious intimacy with God.

But that power is never a given. When our approach is glib or careless, then the benefits of these rituals can be greatly diminished. When we go through the motions, while our hearts and minds are engaged elsewhere, then the celebration of the sacraments become reduced to a superficial transaction, like feeding a parking meter.

And so we constantly have to guard our heart and minds against this glibness and carelessness, against this taking things lightly and going through the motions. And it is helpful to cultivate a reverence, a holy respect for holy things, for holy moments, and their power.

And here I want to say a few words to our two seminary students, Annela and Margarete, who have spent the last two semesters among us as learners and fellow travelers.

Annela and Margarete, today is your last official Sunday with us. Of course you are welcome at St. Francis any time, and we hope to see you again, and see you often, but today is your last Sunday as part of your Ministry in Context Learning, and so I want to say a word to each of you on this last Sunday.

Annela, about two weeks ago, we prepared for worship, and you prepared for your role of Assisting Minister, and at one point you said: I am so nervous about serving the wine during Holy Communion. And my heart rejoiced when you said that. My heart rejoiced for several reasons. First of all, it rejoiced at your honesty. There can be no real learning when people think they already know everything and have it all figured out. So, your honesty about your struggle was very refreshing.

But my heart rejoiced even more at the fact that Holy Communion made you nervous. There is something right and proper about being nervous when we approach holy things. After all, this is Holy Communion! This is not snack time, this is not Happy Hour with appetizers and cocktails, this is Holy Communion. And being nervous is a way to recognize the holiness, the mystery, and the awesomeness of Holy Communion. Nervousness in this context is a good thing, and I hope that in your life as a pastor and spiritual leader you will always retain a deep

reverence for holy things, holy moments, holy places, holy gifts.

And then just a few days later two parishioners mentioned that they feel sometimes nervous when they come to the altar. And again my heart rejoiced, again for the same reasons. The respect for the altar, for the sacraments, for the moment we stand or kneel at the altar, this kind of respect is healthy, and helpful.

In today's gospel reading it appears that John the Baptist took great measures to make sure His listeners approached their baptism with the proper respect. He made sure that they did not take lightly what he offered them. Just as Holy Communion must not be confused with snack time, so baptism must not be confused with a relaxing bath in the river to relieve the desert heat. And John went to quite some length to induce the proper respect in his listeners, and he addressed them with some pretty scary words.

Now, Margarete, I also want to say a word to you. Yes, when it comes to the sacraments, it is important to bring all our hearts and minds to the moment. But in order to bring our hearts and minds, we must first of all bring our bodies, because our hearts and minds follow wherever we take our bodies. And so it is important that we pay attention to our bodies, particularly in worship. This is something that you, Margarete, pointed out to me, and I want to thank you for that.

In fact, thanks to you I made a few small changes in our bulletin. Previously, our bulletin would instruct the congregation with little lines that read: *Please stand, or Please be seated.* But what about those who for various reasons do not wish to stand or who are not able to stand? Some worship leaders say: *Please stand as you are able.* I never liked that sentence, because it invites the worshipers to make guesses about people's supposed abilities. So I thought long and hard what should we say instead. So, what did I come up with? Our bulletin now simply says: *You may sit. or You may stand.* That's it. Short and simple.

Thank you, Margarete for helping me to pay attention to those details.

Now, back to John the Baptist in the desert. We can see how he tried his best to bring the bodies, the hearts, and then minds of people into a renewed and deepened relationship with God. All of this was connected with a lot of hard work, a lot of effort, a lot of scolding and cajoling and dire warnings, as if our relationship with God depends mostly on us. But that was about to change. John the Baptist did not spell out what this change would look like, only that someone will come who will be more powerful than he was.

What was this great, powerful change that was going to come into the world? We who come 2000 years after John, have the benefit of knowing something of this power, because we have 2000 years worth of witnesses, and what they tell us is this:

What came after John was a revolution, a complete reversal in the flow of energy. John had to work very hard to bring people to a holy place, to a holy moment. He had to cajole and scold and preach like a parent reminding their teenagers again and again that they must clean up their room.

The one who came after John who was greater than John was of course, Jesus Christ, and with Christ, everything changed: With Christ, the direction of the energy became reversed. It is not about what we bring to God, but what God brings to us. It is no longer about our work, our efforts, our intentions, and all that we bring to worship. Now it is about God's work, God's gifts poured out over us.

This greater thing which Christ came to bring is God's powerful presence in the water, in the bread, in the wine poured out over us, freely and lavishly given to bless, to nurture, to satisfy our deepest hunger; to bathe us in the intimacy and closeness to God and which we have been craving all along.

A love that requires nothing and gives everything. What could be greater than that?

Amen.