

MORNING PRAYER
THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT
12.13.20

The emphasis in Advent is on the preparation of God's people for the coming of the Messiah. The collect for today asks God to help us who are "ministers and stewards of his mysteries" to do our job of preparing people to receive Him as their judge.

The New Testament lesson tells of the birth of John the Baptist, whose call to repentance was a prelude to the ministry of Jesus on earth. The Old Testament lesson tells of the calling of Jeremiah to join the long line of prophets who discerned and announced the intention of God to send a savior who would bring justice as well as salvation and peace to His people.

God's words to Jeremiah predict the fate of those who join that long line of prophets, which began with Moses and ended with John the Baptist: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you."

To be a real prophet, it seems, is not a pleasant job. Does that seem strange? One would expect that the work of preparing for the coming of the Messiah would be a happy task. But the church insists on somber purple as the color of Advent, and the world insists on persecuting those who are sent to prepare the way for Christ.

The problem, I think, is that people in positions of power like things the way they are. That is why it was the poor and powerless people, the people on the margins of society, who responded favorably to the words and work of both Jesus and John the Baptist while the elite sought to silence them both.

The message that a savior is coming carries an ominous implication. It implies that a savior is needed. If a savior is needed, then something must be wrong somewhere. And the message of Advent is that something is wrong. Something is wrong with society, and more importantly, something is wrong with the people who constitute society. Something is wrong with us.

People tend to cling to what they know, even if they are not happy with it, rather than take a chance on something that could be worse. It is uncomfortable to change the circumstances under which we live.

But if changing the circumstances under which we live is uncomfortable, changing our own selves is downright painful. It is painful to look deeply into our own hearts and realize that the real problems are located there. It is frightening to realize that it is you who must change and not the people around you. But Advent is a call to face that realization.

It is easier to blame our circumstances rather than ourselves for the way we live. That may be the real reason that people don't like to change the circumstances under which they live or the people with whom they live. If they did, then they would no longer be able to locate their problems outside of themselves. They would have no more excuses. They would have to do what Advent calls us to do. Look inside. Examine your own soul. Get rid of what is sinful and make room for what is Godly.

The world into which Jesus came had the same institutions as the world we live in today. Rome was the center of political life. Athens was the center of intellectual life. Corinth was the center of commercial life. Jerusalem was the center of religious life. But Jesus was not born and did not grow up in any of those places. He was born in the sleepy little village of Bethlehem and grew up in the country town of Nazareth. God gave the back of His hand to the great institutional structures of society. He was not really interested in changing them. He was interested in changing people's hearts. He still is.

It is people who create society and not the other way around. So the call to repentance is directed to each one of us individually.

When you stand before the judgment seat of God, you will answer for your own sins; not for the sins of others. But here is the important thing. You can lay all your sins on Jesus and let Him answer for them in your behalf.

So dig out your sins. Look deep inside, not only at the things you have done but at the things you should have done and failed to do. Look at your attitudes. Look at your values. Look at your relationships with other people. Look at how you spend your time, and your money. Look at what you are doing with the abilities that God has given you. If you don't like what you see when you examine those things, or if you think that God will not like what He sees when He examines you, then the time to change is now.

You can't do it by yourself. But you don't have to do it by yourself. God has made available to you many resources: the Scriptures, the Prayer Book, and especially your fellow Christians, who will be glad to pray for you if you ask. But mostly God has sent His Son to pay the penalty that your sins have incurred. As St. Paul says, "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin so that so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

And God also sends the Holy Spirit to guide you and encourage you and comfort you and strengthen you to make the changes that you need to make, not in your environment but in yourself.

A message like that is not likely to be popular. That is why God says to Jeremiah, “They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you to deliver you.” But popular or not, the call to repentance is the church’s Advent message and my message to each of you today.

Let us pray, again the words of today's Collect:

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end.

AMEN

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