

“Waking and Repenting” by David Lloyd

December 8, 2013

The Second Sunday of Advent

This year has a short period between Advent and Christmas. Are you enjoying preparing for Christmas? Most people do. Getting ready for Christmas takes us back to our memories of childhood, when we lived the excitement of the arrival of baby Jesus by helping decorate the Christmas tree, helping bake the cookies (and eating one or two that had broken), and buying and wrapping Christmas presents. As Christmas approached we may have gone caroling, and been in endless rehearsals for the pageant of Jesus' birth. Then on Christmas Eve we may have gone to a candlelight service at church, then came home and written a note to Santa Claus, remembering to put out some milk and cookies and some carrots for the reindeer.

Yes, we have childhood memories of preparing for Christmas but what about Advent? Do we have childhood memories of Advent as a season? We might if our parents were religious. We might have had a little ritual each week when we lit another of the four candles. We might have had an Advent calendar and enjoyed opening a little door each day to find a religious symbol or a Bible verse. But I suspect most of us did not really celebrate the season of Advent per se when we were children. Advent might not even have been mentioned. It got lost in our excitement over preparing for Christmas. We didn't think, "Wow! It's Advent!" What we thought was "Seventeen more days until Christmas!"

This year I've been thinking that preparing for Christmas is

for children (and for the child still within us) but Advent is for grownups. Advent is to Christmas as Lent is to Easter, a time to reflect on the meaning of the forthcoming holy day, a time to prepare ourselves spiritually. What child wants to do that when there is preparing for Christmas to think about? Advent has John the Baptist asking us, "Are you ready for the Messiah? Not preparing for the Messiah as a newborn baby, no, preparing for the Messiah who comes to us already an adult. Hurry up, you don't have much time. The life you have known is going to change forever ANY MINUTE NOW."

This is not a message we usually think about in preparing for Christmas. This is not a message for children. I don't think John would resonate with our Advent theme of waiting and waking, slowly getting reacquainted with God. John would want a theme of waking and quickly preparing ourselves because there is NO time; God is CHANGING THINGS RIGHT NOW.

Matthew's gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, starting with Abraham. The first chapter continues with Mary finding she is pregnant (Matthew has no Annunciation by an angel) and Joseph is dissuaded by a dream not to dissolve the marriage contract, but the birth is barely mentioned. There are no heavenly host of angels and no shepherds in Matthew. The second chapter begins with the arrival of the magi asking King Herod the location of the child who is born to become king of the Jews. The prophecy locates the child in Bethlehem, and the magi go there and pay homage to Jesus, offering their gifts. An angel tells Joseph in a dream to take his family and flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's slaughter of the youngest children of Bethlehem. Herod dies and Joseph's family returns to Israel, but settles in Galilee in Nazareth.

The third chapter opens with "About that time John the Baptist appeared as a preacher in the wilderness of Judea" but to say "about that time" is misleading because nearly 30 years had passed. Who was this man who lived in some of the most desolate wilderness in the Holy Land, who was dressed in

camel's hair, who ate locusts and wild honey? The text doesn't say, but devout Jews would know that the reference to John's clothing and food is a reference to the greatest of the prophets, Elijah, whose story is told in First Kings in the Hebrew Scriptures. David and Solomon's kingdom of Israel had split into a northern kingdom, Israel, and a southern kingdom, Judah. Beginning about 875 BCE King Omri and then his son King Ahab had secured the throne of the northern kingdom with the help of close alliances with non-Jewish kingdoms of Phoenicia and Aram (Syria) and had built a new luxurious royal capital, Samaria with a palace of ivory. The royal court favored the privileged, who tended to come from the cities and towns, with more wealth and power at the expense of those who were from rural areas. King Ahab had married a woman, Jezebel, from Phoenicia, following the precedent of King David and Solomon of taking wives who were not Jewish and were allowed to worship their foreign gods. But Jezebel, whose name indicated she was a princess of the god Baal, was filled with missionary zeal to replace the God of Israel with the Canaanite god Baal and Baal's consort Asherah. Due to her religious fervor there were 450 prophets of Baal and 450 prophets of Asherah in Israel. It was not surprising that the people worshipped whatever gods that their king and queen worshipped and to forget the God of Israel. But then Elijah appeared from the eastern side of the Jordan River. He not only reminded the people of their obligation to worship the God of Israel, but demanded it. On the summit of Mount Carmel Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a test to prove whether Baal or the God of Israel was the true God. The God of Israel was proven to be the true God and Elijah commanded the people to seize the 900 prophets of the false gods. Then Elijah slaughtered all of those prophets.

As if that wasn't enough, King Ahab had coveted a vineyard near the palace but the owner, Naboth, refused to sell because the land had always been owned by his family. Ahab fumed about it and Jezebel schemed to get it for him by procuring false

testimony that Naboth had cursed the king and God, the punishment for which was death. So Naboth was executed and after Ahab took possession of the vineyard Elijah showed up, proclaimed the evil that had been done, and prophesied that both Ahab and Jezebel would die cruel deaths as a result. Years later, when it was time for Elijah to die he was taken up by a chariot and horses of fire into heaven before the eyes of his key disciple Elisha. By the time of John the Baptist, the memory of Elijah as prophet, social critic, and miracle worker had grown so strong that the prophet Malachi had written that God would "send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord" came.

So John the Baptist consciously took on the role of the returning Elijah to reinforce his message of the imminent coming of the Day of the Lord bringing social justice and an end to idolatry. This reenactment of Elijah was appropriate because the situation was somewhat similar to that under King Ahab 800 years before. Under the Roman occupation there was huge disparity between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless, and the Romans had brought their pantheon of gods and goddesses into the Holy Land. Just as those who were favored by Ahab's court had adopted the foreign ways and supported them – going along to be able to get along – so now the Sadducees, the elite of the Jewish people under Roman rule, were collaborating with the Romans to keep the peace.

Matthew tells us that the people "flocked to" John, confessed their sins, and were baptized by him in the Jordan. Why did they flock to John? The first group who came was the have-nots, who lacked political power and who were not wealthy, who longed for the Day of the Lord as overturning the current situation and giving them justice. They came out of hope. But they could see that they had in some way contributed to the situation, saw that as sin, repented, and were baptized. In addition, there were others who were not as desperate but who

truly hoped for change, who could see that the present situation was not sustainable, and that they had had a part in creating and/or maintaining that situation. They saw their role as sinful, as a turning from the way God would have them live. They repented, meaning that they changed their life, and were baptized. Baptism is a ritual cleansing, a purification for the new life that God intended.

But two other groups came that were not looking for hope: Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees may have approved of what John was saying. They were the ones attempting to bring the people back to God by strict obedience to God's teachings as revealed to Moses (the Torah), to the Prophets, and in the Writings (Psalms, histories of God's people, and other books of the Hebrew bible) as interpreted in light of new learning from other cultures and religions. They believed that strict obedience meant strict separation from impurity, including separation from the common people whose lot in life made strict obedience to God's teachings very difficult. The Pharisees would have approved of John's call to repentance and his proclaiming that the Messiah would institute the Kingdom of Heaven, but whether they believed this was to occur imminently is uncertain. After all, the people had clearly not come to a state of purity, which they viewed as a prerequisite to God's eschatology.

The Sadducees had a different perspective. They had a stake in maintaining the status quo because a revolt against Rome would risk everything, especially the Temple and its rituals that had been part of the faith since shortly after the Exodus. They had no hope for change. So they came to see this person who was a potential troublemaker. They would have scoffed at John: they saw no sign of the Kingdom of Heaven breaking out.

And John blasted both the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Who warned them, this brood of vipers, of the coming retribution? God's kingdom had nothing to do with what either party espoused. The Messiah would destroy both groups.

John preached 2000 years ago. Does he have anything to say to us this Advent? Does he give us hope? Our situation is not that different from the situation under King Ahab 2900 years ago, or under the Roman occupation. The privileged still tend to come from the cities, suburbs, and towns, with more wealth and power than those who are from rural areas. Worldwide there is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless and here in the U.S. one percent of the population has over 35 percent of the wealth and 80 percent of the population has just eleven percent of the wealth. As a group African Americans earn less than some other minorities and definitely less than whites. CEOs of our largest corporations are paid in one hour what their average employees earn in a month. Schools in our cities have dropout rates of more than 50 percent but our economy has few if any jobs for people who have no high school diploma. Neither of our political parties shows much interest in using government policy to seriously tackle the problem of inequitable distribution of resources. Our religious leaders appear to be more interested in whether people believe the correct doctrine than whether their congregations are addressing the problems of people who are poor, disabled, and physically or mentally ill.

I am convinced that if John the Baptist looked at the political and religious situation of our nation, he would NOT be saying, "Get busy, Christmas is right around the corner." He would probably be challenging our leaders and those of us who are educated and middle class, saying, "THINGS ARE GONNA CHANGE AND YOU ARE GONNA BE THE LOSERS. YOU HAD CHANCES TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT AND YOU BLEW IT! YOU HAD OPPORTUNITIES TO MOVE TO RACIAL JUSTICE AND YOU SQUANDERED THEM. YOU HAD CHANCES TO FIX YOUR CITIES AND THEIR SCHOOLS AND YOU KEPT ON DOING WHAT YOU HAD BEFORE. YOU COULD HAVE CHOSEN TO MAKE SURE NO ONE BECAME HOMELESS OR WENT HUNGRY OR WENT WITHOUT MEDICAL CARE AND YOU TURNED AWAY. IT'S TOO LATE FOR YOU." No one who heard John would be looking forward to the coming of a baby at

Christmas, to decorations and concerts and gift-buying.

In Seekers we have our own John the Baptist in the form of the Eyes to See, Ears to Hear mission group. The members of Eyes to See Ears to Hear use their eyes to see and ears to hear things we may not want to see and hear and then they bring them to our attention and suggest ways we can act. Eyes to See, Ears to Hear describes its call as being a place of prayer and action for the myriad circumstances in the world that are in need of justice, peace and healing. We seek to create space to pray, even when we don't see any "way out," any action step, even, perhaps, any hope. We seek to create a place to hold the suffering and agony. But we also seek to promote engagement in addition to prayer in those places where we see possibility for connection."

Eyes to See Ears to Hear has invited conversation in Seekers around human trafficking, health care, torture, environmental concerns, healing racism and learning from people of other faiths.

From those challenging conversations we can move to repentance. Repentance means facing up to our sin and turning to a new direction, a direction that God wills for us. It is a process of hope. Repentance isn't easy. Coming face to face with our own role in injustice and in idolatry is difficult. It means being willing to be held accountable for the problem, willing to acknowledge that we have sinned. This means we are willing to be extremely uncomfortable, have tears of guilt, willing to have our stomachs churning, willing to feel depressed, willing to lie awake sleeplessly, as we live out the fight between our best and less than best inner selves.

Elizabeth O'Connor described this in her book *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*:

I want to acknowledge aloud all those dark, unacceptable strands that weave in and out of my life, so that the whole

of me can be baptized into the new. This means that I cannot be an idealized mother, or sister, or church leader. There is no liberation for anyone in that role. Better that we all be pilgrims together, helping each other to discover the path that is our path...Each of us must struggle for agreement between all those disparate selves who live in us...

As we risk repentance we may feel relief as a new hopeful direction presents itself, perhaps dimly, perhaps clearly. What would turning to a new direction regarding income inequality be like? What would turning to a new direction for racial justice be like? What would repentance for ecological destruction and global warming be like for us? The good news is that if we try to discern God's will we can choose the direction that we turn to in order to align with that divine will. We can respond to the U.S. role in Guatemala's civil war by helping to build schools and libraries in areas scarred by violence. We can respond to the U.S. role in supporting apartheid in South Africa by supporting missions that help black children and young adults move forward in dignity and hope. We can respond to those who are homeless in our streets by offering them care packs. Or, we can choose other ways to align with God's will. We can use our money in ways that help bring about God's vision for the world.

As we continue in Advent, I invite you to listen as John the Baptist says here and now, "WAKE UP AND REPENT! The Messiah is almost here. The Messiah is already an adult, not a baby. You don't have much time. WAKE UP AND REPENT NOW! The Kingdom of God is coming ANY MINUTE NOW!"

May we hear his urgency as good news.