



90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Associate Minister: Amy Hollis
Choral Director: Mindy Shilansky
Accompainst: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

Peace with John the Baptist

Matthew 3: 1-12

Isaiah 11: 1-9

December 9, 2007

There's something very disturbing about John the Baptist. It's not just that he always shows up out of nowhere for our pleasant pre-Christmas season like an uninvited guest, this wilderness wanderer dressed so strangely in camel's hair cloth. Nor is it that his preaching is always in your face, singularly fire and brimstone, and that he makes his way about on a starvation diet. Those are enough reasons to make most of us squeamish, but what sends a shiver down my spine every second Sunday in Advent when the Baptist comes around, is that when I look into those piercing, passionate eyes, he becomes, for me, a mirror; to my soul, yes, but also to the collective soul of the human race.

There's really no way around it, unless we simply ignore him or cling to our preconceived ideas; this one compels us to look deeply into the mirror that is the cousin of Jesus. And that's more than a bit unnerving. O, there's a lot of good and decent in there – in me, in you, collectively as a species. Only those who promote a life and world view of self-abnegation or claim as empty all the values brought to bear by our culture, can claim that the mirror is only dark shadow. But when I force myself to stay focused, or as I said last week, to really pay attention, his face reflects my whole self, the whole of humanity. And what I see is troubling; deeply troubling. Once we look at the complete picture today, what's really going on, how could it not be? . . . What's it like for you to really look into what's happening all over the world, in our nation, right at home? How does that make you feel?

John knows how we feel. And he knows the road we're traveling because he saw it a couple thousand years ago in his own "today" when he swept in out of the wilderness and said, "Repent. Repent," he cries out in Matthew's Gospel, "for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Which calls to mind a Chinese proverb:

"If we do not change our direction, we are likely
to end up where we're headed."

That's what repentance is, you know: to stop, turn around, change

directions. Wouldn't we like to do that – with the direction the world is now heading with all the war, poverty, disease, slave trade on the rise, the collapsing of Earth's life systems, the growing angst in our personal lives . . . ? Wouldn't we like to change direction?

Of course we would! I don't know a single soul who thinks how things are going in the world is pretty good. So, why don't we change directions? I don't know, although I have a very strong suspicion that we keep on heading in the direction we are going because we don't know what other direction to take and how to get there. But I do know that this is why John doesn't just beat us down and bum us out; he points us in another direction, just like Advent does, to Another, the One who is coming and to that other way of living: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

A new direction. When I say that, I'm not talking about reformation or revitalization – of the kingdom of Rome, of repairing political or economic or religious institutions. I'm not talking about fixing structures that are dying, even those most cherished ones of ours. John is talking about something new, a radically new direction: the kingdom of heaven. Or, we might want to put it this way: the reign of peace.

This is the theme of this second Sunday of Advent, peace is. Peace is what we have longed for since human time immemorial – all of us. And so, its important, I believe, for us to know that though "darkness is the absence of light," as Rabbi Kenneth Cohen writes, "peace is not just the cessation of hostilities. Treaties may be signed, ambassadors exchanged and armies sent home, yet there still may not be peace. Peace is metaphysical and cosmic in its implications. It is more than the absence of war. Peace, in fact, is not the absence of anything, but rather, the ultimate affirmation of what can be."

Let that sink in: peace is the affirmation of what can be. Do you remember the reading from Isaiah? Listen, again, to part of the vision:

"The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall
lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

.....

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy
mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the
Lord as the waters cover the sea."

(Isaiah 11: 6-9)

This isn't the way it is – don't try to literalize it. It's a vision, from the poetic imagination of the prophet, of what can be – particularly in human relationships. It is a radically different direction than where we're headed. And the poetry gives us a way to it, as well:

“a little child shall lead them.”

Can you imagine if we ordered and governed our human societies by looking through the eyes of a child? A child: not old enough to be tainted and cynical, believing that the way to lead is the way of the bully, spreading fear or by force or threat of force; not corrupted through the use of oppressive power and dividing people – into different religions or red and blue, conservative or liberal, good or evil – then retaining power that way. Not all, I know, but most young children trust and they want to have everyone play in the game. She looks at life with the eyes of wonder and possibility, cries when he find a dead bird, an uprooted tree or a friend skins his knee. She asks why there are hungry people when we have enough and why do we hate our enemies and why are we cutting down so many trees?

A different direction? Radically different. Naïve? If you insist on cynism. Insane? Only if you think that how we do things today isn't insane. Peace is made through peaceful means – period. Any other way of doing it is something other than peace – it's the absence of something.

One last thing: the new direction, the way of peace, compels us to hold on to hope. Hope, of course, is the candle we lit last Sunday on the Advent wreath, the candle that burns the longest of the four. It has to.

There's a story told by Rabbi Hugo Gyn, a Holocaust survivor who was imprisoned in the same barracks as his father. He writes: “Despite the unspeakable conditions, many Jews, including my father, held on to whatever observances they could. One midwinter evening an inmate reminded him that it was soon the first night of Chanukah, the feast of lights. Over the next days my father constructed a small menorah of metal scraps. For a wick, he took threads from his prison uniform. Instead of oil, he somehow managed to wheedle butter from a guard.

“Such observances were strictly verboten, but we were used to taking risks. What I protested was the ‘waste’ of precious calories. Would it not be better to share the butter on a crust of bread than to burn it?

“Hugo,” said my father, “both you and I know that a person can live a very long time without food. But I tell you, a person cannot live a single day without hope. This oil will kindle a flame of hope. Never let hope die out. Not here; not anywhere. Remember this.”

And so, we do. This is the way of peace – by holding on to hope through the vision of Isaiah and following the light of Christ. May peace be with you and in you all.