

Sermon: ADVENT 2, December 6, 2015

In the Name...

I greet you this morning in the seventh year of the presidency of Barack Obama, when Michael Curry was Presiding Bishop, Chris Christie was Governor of New Jersey, and Kim Fleetwood, Swedesboro Tax Collector.

There are a number of lessons in our Scriptures today, but, I'd like to start with this one. It's true that long ago, major events were usually dated by reference to local events or leaders, but, there's more to the opening of St. Luke's Chapter Three than just a desire to tell time.

Among the people whose names we heard mentioned were those of the Roman emperor and his governor, some regional rulers, and the chief religious authorities - a short "Who's Who," of the people in charge at every level; international and local, political and spiritual. And the next thing we're told is "the Word of God came", but, not to any of them. God's Word passes right by the Emperor and veers around Pilate's palace; slips past the princes and tetrarchs; jumps right over the Temple in Jerusalem; and finally lands out in the middle of nowhere and comes to someone named John.

In other words, God's Word did not come to any of the folks who ran the show. God's Word did not even come to someone in the city. God's Word came to the most unlikely person imaginable, but, a man who was open to receiving the Word and doing something about it. Prepare the way of the Lord.

And that's the first message of the scriptures today. The Word of God comes to the most unlikely people. The Word of God comes to us. Yes. We're the unlikely ones. In the season of Advent, for all we talk about preparing for the return of Jesus, I don't think there's one of us who would expect to answer our door and find him standing there. And yet, Jesus is always at our door, the door of our heart. And he brings his words to us with him. And that leads us into the second message.

John proclaims that the world in which Luke has just placed us is about to be changed. To be ready for that, people must themselves change. John invites people to do this by doing more good things for others and then, echoing the words of the prophets, he calls out for a change of the earth itself. The valleys shall be filled and mountains and hills made low. The crooked shall be made straight, the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. John has received, and proclaims, the vision of a new heavens and new earth.

Paul picks up on that vision in his letter to the Philippians when he asks for Christians to let everything they do in life be determined by an overflowing love. If they live this way, he says, then, they will have produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.

And if we're in any doubt what that means, John describes a time where people in need are clothed by those who have more than they need and people who have food share it. Doing for others, improving their lives, is what makes the crooked world straight. Those who are empty

can be filled. Those who are high shall be brought low. And, then, even the natural world will change because of our actions of love.

And that is the second message of today's scriptures, but, there is a third.

Last week, I wished all of you a Happy New Year as we began our Advent Season. And as we all know, the coming of a new year is always an occasion for both public celebration and personal reflection. The Jewish New Year festival is Rosh Hashanah, a time of great celebration, but, it ends with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. I'm curious. Has anyone ever seen a Jewish New Year greeting card? They carry the message, "May you be written in the Book of Life." You see the Jews believe that at the beginning of each year, their names are written in God's Book of Life. But, they're written in disappearing ink.

As the year goes on, as sins are committed, the names fade away little by little and so part of the new year celebration is a Day of Atonement, of making a new beginning, so that what is faded can be re-inked. That's a bit of what Advent is like. A time for us to reflect on what we have done and failed to do and make a new start for a new year. I don't think, though, that I'll see many cards which read, "Merry Christmas! May you repent of your sins."

But, every Advent we hear the story of John the Baptist and it's primarily a story in which he called people to examine themselves. Acknowledge, he said, your moral and ethical failures, your prejudice and pride, your sloth and greed and make a new start. And what's really amazing is that so many people did just that. They flocked to him in droves from miles around, confessed their sins, and washed in the River Jordan.

In John's time, the washing ceremony called baptism was the way people showed they wanted to make a new start. This was something people did whenever they felt burdened by sins. Jesus, though, would take this repeatable ceremony and transform it into a one-time sacrament in which our very souls, not merely our names, would be written permanently in the Book of Life.

But, Christian baptism only gives eternal life, not salvation. We still sin, and to deal with the sins we commit after baptism Jesus gave us something to take the place of the Jewish baptism ceremony. He gave us the sacrament of reconciliation, often called confession.

Oh, yes, it's one of the seven sacraments and it's a separate service in our Prayer Book, just like weddings or baptisms, though I don't think its pages are as well-thumbed as others. I was once asked about the Episcopalian rules on confession. It's very simple. All can, none must, some should.

But, all of us should really think about what it means because Jesus can only be the Saviour to those who know they need saving. Perfect people, people who don't feel sorry, people who never make mistakes, don't need Jesus.

Three lessons, then, today to help us keep this Advent Season. Be alert. God's word comes to us who least expect to receive it. Reach out. Doing good for others is doing God's work. And, be reflective. We probably should take advantage of the sacrament of reconciliation.

And so, in the seventh year of the presidency of Barack Obama, when Michael Curry was Presiding Bishop, Chris Christie was Governor of New Jersey, and Kim Fleetwood, Swedesboro Tax Collector, I commend to you the keeping of this Advent.

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