

Advent 2 A 2010

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19

Romans 15: 4-13

Matthew 3:1-22

“Repent for the kingdom of God has come near.” Matthew 3:2

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

**Happy Advent. Happiness is not something one associates with Advent, especially after hearing John the Baptist take on the Pharisee and Sadducees, calling them “a brood of vipers.” At that time if there was a despised member of the animal kingdom, the snake was it.**

**From Genesis on it had a very bad reputation. To crawl in the dust, to slither and slide, to hide in bushes, didn’t endear it to anyone. To be called a viper was a huge insult. For John to call the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers certainly didn’t endear him to the religious authorities of the day.**

**John is out in the wilderness, that place for the Jews that represented danger and opportunity, fear and faith all at the same time. The Jews were taken to the wilderness by God and wandered through it for 40 years. But it was also in the wilderness that the Jews were cared for by God, protected by God’s presence in the pillar of fire and assured of their salvation.**

**John does not go to the cities where the people are; the people come to him. They came to him for the ritual cleansing, the rite of Jewish baptism where they were made clean once again to worship God, a washing of their bodies symbolizing a cleansing of their soul.**

**The Pharisees and Sadducees come for baptism and John is all over them. “How dare you! How dare you come for baptism thinking that just because you are descended from Abraham you do not need to live a life repenting for what you do. How dare you come for baptism and not believe that you are to live a new life, a changed life, a life that shows that you have turned away from the world’s ways and turned towards**

**God's ways." John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees in no uncertain terms that they cannot rest on their laurels, their pedigree, and their office to save them "from the wrath to come."**

**"Bear fruit worthy of repentance," John tells them. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."**

**Water, wrath, unquenchable fire: images that evoke fear, and with good reason. We drown in water. We cower in the face of wrath. We burn; we die with fire. So often we hear these images and shudder. Water, wrath, unquenchable fire; we associate these with our own suffering, we see an unending torment, something we can never escape from.**

**But what if our impressions of these images are wrong? What if we are misappropriating them, ascribing to them qualities that were never meant to be seen in the way we see them? If we saw these images differently, perhaps we would also see the message in them differently. If we can look at them through the lens of faith instead of fear what would they look like then?**

**The water of baptism was a ritual cleansing symbolizing a cleansing of the soul. John knew that what he was doing was symbolic and that the one he pointed to, the one that would come after him, would baptize his followers in a way that led to something more than symbol, that led to actual change, to transformation of their lives.**

**With Christ, we literally drown in the waters of baptism. We die to the ways of the world and to how we want to live only to live into God and the way God wants us to live. We must ask ourselves the question both individually as well as communally, are we living the will of God and the promises of God, or have our own ideals and longings become the focus?<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> *Homiletics* November/ December 2010 Vol. 22, #6 p. 44

**I don't know about you, but the image of God's wrath invokes more fear in me than any water or fire possibly could. The thought that I could evoke world shattering divine anger terrifies me, even though I am not a member of a hell fire and brimstone denomination.**

**Barbara Brown Taylor in her book Gospel Medicine describes God's wrath like this: "He will judge between those who are on the way and those who are in the way as he clears his own way through the world, and all of us shall know ourselves for who we are."<sup>2</sup>**

**God's wrath is world shattering, but in a way completely different than how we normally think of it. God's wrath is a way of judging us so that we can see ourselves for who we really are.**

**Could it be that is what we are really afraid of? Is it easier for us to subscribe to God a punishing, thundering anger rather than a love so deep that he holds up a mirror to us so that we can see our own reflection and see for ourselves who we really are? Is God's judgment just a way to get our attention and to say, "This is how you see yourself, and this is how I see you. This is what you will be with me."**

**God's wrath is his showing us where we are and what we are and what we can be, what we were intended to be all along. What we are and what we are meant to be; it is a long and deep divide that separates the two.**

**God shatters my world so that I can see the divide, a divide that I cannot hope to cross alone. God's shows me how much I need him by shattering all my pretences and defenses, all the ways I fool and delude myself on a daily basis when I think I can rest on my laurels, my backround or my office to save me rather than on Christ saving me. It is not hell that Christ saves me from so much as it is myself.**

**Unquenchable fire, what exactly is unquenchable fire? It is a fire that cannot be extinguished no matter what you do to it. You can do everything you know how to put it out and regardless it won't go out, it continues to burn with incredible intensity.**

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. Gospel Medicine (Cambridge: Cowley 1995) p. 129

**When we hear the term unquenchable fire, how many of us think of the fires of hell? I know that it is what first comes to my mind. But what if we are wrong? What if the image God wants us to have is not the fires of hell, but the fires of his unquenchable love?**

**In Advent we hear a lot about fire, a refiners fire. One day a goldsmith was asked by someone how many times he put the gold in the fire. The goldsmith replied that he put it back in the fire as many times as it took to get the impurities out. “Well, “ the person asked, “how do you know when all the impurities are out?” “When I can see my reflection in it,” the goldsmith replied.**

**This is what God’s unquenchable fires burns away. All of our impurities, all our sin are not put into the fires of hell, but into the fires of God’s love. No matter what we throw at God, no matter what we do to try and extinguish God’s love for us, the fire of that love continues to burn with an incredible intensity. It is that unquenchable fire of love that continues to refine us until such time as God’s image is reflected back to the world.**

**God’s unquenchable fire of love is a fire of transformation. Repentance is being willing to let God take us and refine us. Repentance is letting God melt us and mold us into what will serve his purposes, not our own.**

**The fire of transformation is not a comfortable fire but what results from it is absolutely amazing.**

**God did not come into the world so that we could stay the same. There would be no purpose or point to the Incarnation if that were the case. But God didn’t come into the world to scare the hell out of us either.**

**God came into the world to refine us and to use us. But most importantly, God came into the world to love us, to love us into wholeness and holiness.**

**The question for us this Advent is will we let him?**

**Amen.**

