

December 8, 2013 (Second Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Matthew 3:1-12

TITLE: It's time to get ready!

Picture in your mind this familiar scene: bundled up in your warmest jacket, you approach your favorite store – Barnes & Noble, Target, Macy's, Best Buy – it doesn't much matter. You are greeted by a bearded man in a fluffy red suit. He rings a bell beside a kettle, and says, "Merry Christmas." Or he simply smiles, trying to catch your eye as you walk by. And you can't help but be moved a little. The part inside of you that has longed to please Santa since your earliest childhood days wants to clearly end up on the "nice" list. The part inside of you that equates bell ringing with angels getting wings thinks that this time of year has a real piece of magic. And so you scrape inside your pocket to find some loose change – or maybe even a few loose bills – and tuck them inside the kettle. Your good deed is done for the day. You were inspired to action. You feel good.

Now picture this same scene: bundled up in your warmest jacket, you approach your favorite store – Barnes & Noble, Target, Macy's, Best Buy – it doesn't much matter. You are greeted by a bearded man in a fluffy brown suit. He is not much more than skin and bones – you find out later it is because he forages for food, eating what little he can scrape up off of the land or in open dumpster. But there is something larger than life about him. He rings no bell, but he stands on the sidewalk getting everyone's attention, crying out: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" You try to avoid eye contact when he starts to say: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham... and every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire!"

You can't help but listen to his words. They ring in your ears as you try to rush by to get in from out of the cold. You tuck your head into your scarf and pull your coat a little tighter around yourself. You feel a little uneasy and a bit of relief when you make it to the warmth of the store, where a familiar 'musak' version of your favorite Christmas carol plays through the loud speaker overhead.

As you unwrap your scarf, you notice that some patrons have approached security and told them about this unsettling character standing outside of the store. As you pull out your list, you see through the window that he is politely asked to leave, and although he moves off of the sidewalk by the door, you can still see him and still hear him from his new post across the street. What does it all mean, you wonder? What was THAT all about?

Our Advent readings for this morning do not let us jump ahead to the feel-good story of Christmas morning. We get no glimpses of Angelic visitation or shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, or of Joseph learning of God's call through his dreams. This year, we can't get to Bethlehem without first meeting John the Baptist.

His words seem out of place. We expect John's Advent announcement of the coming Christ to come in the form of a joyful leap in his mother's womb, as his mother Elizabeth greets her cousin Mary. But instead we are propelled into the future where this little baby, now all grown up, becomes a herald once again for the coming of Christ. He cries out in the wilderness, inviting people to repent and to be baptized – to shed their sins and all that holds them back from God's will and to receive the mantle of God's forgiveness. He cries out in the wilderness, exposing the hypocrisy of unrighteous leaders – saying in strong words that you cannot judge a person by their outward appearances or titles, but rather by their actions and the fruit they bear.

John takes us to uncomfortable places. We can't help but wonder if his words are meant, at all, for us. We think about the unrighteous places in our lives – the grudges we carry, the airs we put on, the prejudices we claim as righteousness, the greed we mask as necessity. We think about how we throw ourselves into busy efforts rather than surrendering to God. We think about the ways we hide from ourselves, and the ways we try to hide from God, and we wonder if John's words are calling us out.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, John's words call us to get ready for Christ. He reminds us that the One who was and is and is to come does not ask if Black Friday spending is up over last year, but rather asks if our hearts are ready to receive the Incarnate Christ. And while John's cries disrupt the sentimentality of the season that we love so much, his call reorients our intention. He shifts our focus toward Christ and toward the miracle of this season – that God in Christ has put on flesh and dwelt among us; that God in Christ challenges the structures and statuses of this world and orients us toward the promised kingdom of peace; that God in Christ overcomes our sins and redeems us for everlasting life. With Christ, the impossible becomes possible. Enemies are friends; dividing lines break down; community is authentic; creation is whole. And John tells us that this kingdom is on it's way – and to us: "It's time to get ready!"

John Burgess writes:

What John—and Advent—remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God's desire to realign us to accord with Christ's life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God's power to transform us into Christ's image. For Matthew, John's strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the gospel. While warm and fuzzy feelings at Christmastime are not all wrong, they fail to capture the full

picture of what God has done for us in becoming human flesh.[1]

We need Advent. And we need John. We need to have things shaken up a bit, to be challenged to step out of our complacency and into the new reality that is possible through Christ. We need this wake-up call of an invitation so that we might stop and think about what we need to do on the inside to get ready to welcome the Incarnate Christ.

It is not usually easy to follow the words of the prophet – of any age. The prophetic voice unseats us as much as it inspires us. Prophets hold up a mirror that allows us to see what's going on on the inside – the inside of our hearts, the inside of our communities and systems and governments. And then they call us to heal those broken inner places so that fullness of life is truly possible.

We know that prophetic words are not relegated to the Palestinian wilderness millennia ago. We have been blessed with and convicted by contemporary prophets whose message into the day and time in which we live remind us that even WE, even our world, needs to change. They call us to a new way of life – often a counter-cultural way of life – that wakes us up to the sins within ourselves and our systems so that we can leave them behind and live.

Many of us grieved with those around the world upon hearing the news that former President and freedom fighter of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, passed away on Thursday at the age of 95. Mandela served to many of us as one who lived a prophetic life that was easily measured by the fruits of his labors. He did not do what was easy. He did what he believed was right in the fight against the racist oppression of apartheid. His efforts, ideas and plans were all in service of an ideal – an ideal that South Africa should not be a racialized nation, but that all South

Africans might share equal freedoms and equal opportunities under the law. He lived his belief – mobilizing the ANC, risking his life, enduring more than 27 years of imprisonment at the hands of an unjust court. And when he was released from prison, he spearheaded the dismantling of the apartheid regime and the reconciliation of a nation, as the first Black President of South Africa.

But he'd be the first to say that it's not about him. It was about the ideal – an ideal that he was prepared to live for, an ideal he said he hoped to see realized,...an ideal for which he was prepared to die.

Somehow Mandela could envision a new way of being. He could envision a new way of being a nation that embodied virtues of equality, justice, honesty and peace. And he envisioned a new way of being a human being – setting aside the gratification of retributive justice and working alongside his oppressors to realize the ideal for which he fought - an ideal that embodied reconciliation and justice for all. His life and legacy richly express the values given voice by these words, written in a letter to his then wife, Winnie, from prison so long ago:

In judging our progress as individuals, we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one's social position, influence, and popularity, wealth and standard of education...but internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one's development as a human being: honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve your fellow men – qualities within the reach of every soul. (Mandela: The Authorized Portrait)

The voice of the prophet offer us a wake up call. As we hear the voice crying out in the wilderness place of our lives, we are called to open our eyes, so that we can notice our need for a

Savior -- and that we might likewise recognize our Savior's promised coming. And in this season of preparation, this is what we must do to get ready. In the midst of tree-trimming and cookie-baking, we need to pause. We need to listen. We need to look -- inside and around us. And we need to get ready -- it's time to be transformed by the hope of the Promised Messiah.

It's time to get ready to receive the Incarnate Christ into our lives and our world. It's time for us to prepare a place for him in our hearts, so that we can be changed by the possibility He offers.

Let us heed the call of the prophets. Let us shed all that ensnares us -- even all that preoccupies us -- and cultivate the quality of our hearts. Let us turn away from our sin and live into the virtues of honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others. Let us, this Advent season, get our hearts and our lives ready to welcome the Incarnate Christ - because the good news is that our Savior is on His way.

[1] Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word -- Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration