

Advent 2, Year A
December 12, 2007
Trinity, Sonoma
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Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72 1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

It's about the Baby

John the Baptist is in count down mode. Can you identify with that? John the Baptist is "preparing the way of the Lord." What are we preparing for? John the Baptist shows up just like clockwork every year on the second Sunday of Advent in the midst of the pre-Christmas rush. It's a sure thing, no matter how many other uncertainties and changes there may be.

Here at Trinity, you have a new rector! You and Susan are living your way through your first liturgical year, still getting to know each other, discovering how you will grow together, and be the body of Christ in this corner of God's kingdom. The Episcopal Church is wondering if it can stay with the Anglican Communion, and what staying, or leaving, would mean. We remain a world at war and the peaceable kingdom described in Isaiah seems as far off as it ever has. Then, there are the uncertainties and changes in each of our lives: the scary diagnosis, the broken relationship, the loss of a loved one.

BUT this much we know, if it's the second Sunday of Advent, we will meet up with John the Baptist, a prophet living in the wilderness, wearing a coat of camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. "A voice crying out in the wilderness; crying out all kinds of unpopular things: "repent," you brood of vipers," and "bear fruit worthy of repentance." John the Baptist says that our heritage, our connections, will not get us special privileges. As one translator puts it: "Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life." So, what does your life look like on the second Sunday of Advent?

You may know that the Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. It does not have to do with feeling sorry or guilty. *Metanoia* means to turn around, to change your mind. John the Baptist is calling the people of Israel to turn around: to turn away from the past, because something new is coming. God is about to turn the tables on sin and power and death. John the Baptist is preparing everyone who will listen, then and now, for kingdom living. We are going to need to turn around, change our mind about lots of things, things we thought we knew, things we thought we could count on.

I remember a required class at seminary on Christian Education. It was just about this time of year; the teacher had us break into small groups to read the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke and plan a children's Sunday School lesson. Luke's Christmas story is the most familiar one. It's the one that begins, "In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered" (or "taxed" ... if you're used to the King James version.) The one with Joseph and Mary, "great with child," traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem; the one with the stable and manger; the shepherds and angel; the one with a heavenly host singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among all people."

A friend of mine was in a group with two veteran Sunday School teachers who had lots of experience working with children. The group began to work with the teacher's suggested questions: What are the main ideas and themes in the story? What projects or activities might you include? The other two women were off and running; the creative juices flowing; words and ideas spilling forth; lesson plans falling into place.

My friend, feeling intimidated amidst their energy and enthusiasm, tentatively said, "You know, I think the main idea is the baby." "Everyone likes angels," they said, "we could make halos and wings." "I think the good news is that the baby is born." "The stable is interesting," they said, "maybe we could build one." Feeling increasingly frustrated, yet increasing clear, my friend proclaimed: "*It's about the baby.*"

I don't know about you, but I need my friend to walk right next to me every step of Advent, reminding me: it's about the baby. When I'm shopping and writing cards; cooking, cleaning, and decorating, all good things which I love to do (except for the cleaning), I need to remember the reason we do any of it: it's about the baby. This is John's message too: it's about Jesus. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals." John the Baptist is only the witness, the witness to the one who comes to us as a baby.

This stole I am wearing today, shows Mary pregnant, great with child: a visual reminder of the mystery of the incarnation. God turns the tables on us, sending, not a warrior, or a politician, or a CEO, but a baby.

Like us, Jesus begins as a single cell; grows in his mother's womb; is born in struggle, pain, and blood. Like us, he starts off completely vulnerable and dependent; grows up, leaves home, finds his way in the world. He knows fear and love, joy and heartache. Like us, he dies. However, when Jesus dies something extraordinary happens - for him, and for us. The good news, the amazing news that John the Baptist is preparing us for is this: We are made for a different kind of life than we thought. We are made for a kind of life that is possible because God chose to come to us as a baby.

The One who is fully human and fully God.

The One who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The One who feeds and nourishes us with his own body and blood.

The One who calls us to a new life where death is not the final word.

John the Baptist is counting down, and so are we. The truth is we're never really ready for Christmas or a baby, but that's okay. God knows what we need and when we need it. As we count down and make our preparations for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Prince of Peace, let us remember what the story we celebrate is finally all about. It's about the baby.