

Coming to the Manger to Find Peace

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6

December 6, 2009

The Second Sunday of Advent

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John the Baptist could be called the Zamboni driver of the divine narrative. You do know what a Zamboni machine is, don't you? It's the ice re-surfacing machine at a hockey game. Just before the game begins, the Zamboni driver comes out and smoothes the surface of the ice. The Zamboni machine was invented by a man named Frank Zamboni. People don't go to a hockey game to watch the Zamboni driver. The Zamboni driver prepares the way for the main event, the hockey game.

Or, we could say that John the Baptist is the grip of the divine narrative. You who are involved in the theater know how important the grips are. They are the technicians who set up the equipment—the lighting, the cameras, sound equipment, and all the other stuff that is necessary for the production. Again people don't go to the theater to watch the grips. The grips prepare the way for the main event.

Or, we might also say that John the Baptist is the church sexton of the divine narrative. "Sexton" is the technical term for the church custodian. The sexton's job is to make sure the church buildings and graveyard, if the church has one, are properly maintained. I doubt any of you came to church today hoping to meet our custodian, fine man though he is. The church sexton prepares the way.

In Luke 3, the divine narrative is unfolding, as it was predicted by the prophet Malachi and others long before. John the Baptist played a role in that narrative, but John was not the main event. He didn't try to be the main event. His call from God was to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus the Christ, who was the main event. John fulfilled that call by preaching baptism, Luke says. It was a message that called the people to repentance, to wash away their sinful ways. It was a call for the people to be the best that God had made them to be. John challenged the people to resist the tendency to slide toward our baser selves: selfish, petty, unkind, and generally unloving.

If you continue reading in Luke 3, you see that the people heard John and they believed his message. Like the crowd at our recent community Thanksgiving service, the people even talked back to John, asking, “What then should we do?”

John got specific. He told them that if they had two coats to share one coat with someone who didn't have one. Then he said the same thing about food. If you have an ample amount of food, share some with a person who doesn't.

About that time a group of tax collectors called out with the same question: “Teacher, what should we do?” You know preachers dream about this kind of sermon, don't you? It never quite happens this way, but we do hope. John told the tax collectors, who were notorious for collecting more taxes than they should, to collect only the prescribed amount, no more.

And then a group of soldiers threw up their hand and said, “And we, what should we do?” And John told them not to rob people by intimidation and false accusations.

Do you see what was happening? John the Baptist was preparing the way for the main event. Jesus the Christ was coming, and John was calling the people to be the best that God had made them to be: generous, loving, and kind.

It is appropriate that we meet John early in Advent. His voice crying in the wilderness calls us too to prepare our lives for the coming of Jesus the Christ. Be the best that God has made you to be, he tells us. Resist the slide toward cynicism, selfishness, and all those things that are beneath us. And sometimes that's hard, isn't it? The temptation is to give in and be as mean, cynical, and selfish as everybody else. But John reminds us that there's a danger in that: we're not prepared for the main event.

It is also appropriate that we come to the Lord's Table early in Advent. This is a table of preparation. Here we are invited to place all those things that leave us unprepared. Here we are invited to remember that the main event culminated upon a cross with a broken body and shed blood. Today we reenact the divine drama by consuming the bread and wine. We come to a manger to find peace by way of this table of preparation.

The Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide. As we come to the Table of the Lord, let us confess our sin.

Prayer of Confession (In unison)

Holy and Loving God, we have dwelt in darkness and preferred it to the light. We have been proud of our accomplishments and despaired over our shortcomings. Smooth down the mountains of our pride and lift up the valleys of our doubts. Open a path in the wilderness of our lives that we might find our way to you again. Refine us and prepare us once again for life in Your kingdom. Hear our prayers, O Lord.

Assurance of Pardon

God love you so much that in the day of Christ's coming you will be made pure and blameless. Accept God's forgiveness and reap the harvest of righteousness that comes from life in Christ. In the name of God, live as forgiven people.