

Second Sunday in Advent
9 December 2007
Church of the Savior
Orange City, Iowa
The Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome, Presiding
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching

Isaiah 11.1-10
Psalm 72.1-7, 18-19
Romans 15.4-13
Matthew 3.1-12

Repentance

A few weeks ago Karen and I flew to San Diego for the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL. From my point of view, it was a worthwhile conference. I spent the better part of a day on the USS Midway, the aircraft carrier now permanently docked in San Diego harbor and open to the public. When commissioned in 1945, it was the largest ship in the world: 972 feet long, 238 feet wide, with space for well over a hundred aircraft and crew of 4000, it was a vast three-dimensional steel maze, chock full of steep ladders, hatches, endless, intricate narrow passageways, complicated machinery, engines, pipes, tubes, control panels, navigational instruments, planes, guns, bombs. While Karen languished at scholarly presentations, I concluded my tour relaxing on the ship's fantail, sipping a beer and watching the sun settle into the blue Pacific. It was great.

The next evening, I visited another San Diego tourist attraction—this time with Karen—the Natural History Museum, which housed an exhibit of 27 Dead Sea Scrolls, on loan from the Israel Antiquities Authority. There, painstakingly assembled and lovingly preserved under glass, were the ragged shards of two thousand year old papyrus and vellum, inscribed with the words from the Psalms, Leviticus, Job and Isaiah. Attendees

quietly filed by, showing as much quiet respect as, the day before, we had showed the guns, missiles, and bombs affixed to the planes on the Midway's flight deck.

I was struck by the contrast between the two exhibits, between the 74,000 ton ship and the fragile flakes a breeze could take away, between the insubstantial, fragmentary word of God and the massive, seemingly indestructible weapon docked in the harbor, between the long buried and silent, life-giving words of God and the great proud ship, built to bring violent justice to the nation's enemies. This was, for me, reminiscent of the contrast Matthew seems intent on making in his portrayal of John the Baptist and his encounter with Jesus.

On its face, John's pugnacious reaction to the arrival of the Pharisees and Saducees is unreasonable. They are, after all, ostensibly there, like everyone else, for repentance and baptism in preparation for God's long-awaited deliverance of Israel. We can only assume that John regards their repentance as bogus. The first—and too easy—thing to think is that in John's eyes they are hypocritically going along with the common people to look good, that they are wicked people who want to keep on being wicked while faking repentance. But what John goes on to say suggests something somewhat different: "*Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor!'*" They don't see themselves as in need of repentance. It's not them, it's the unwashed masses, at best careless in keeping the law, of dubious religious purity...*they're* the ones who need to repent, to clean up their act to be ready for the coming of the Lord. I imagine these religious leaders go along with the crowd's enthusiastic response to John to encourage

them to do what they themselves do not need to do, for *they* are already righteous, in good standing with God. Scrupulous keepers of the law and dedicated guardians of the temple, they have a privileged position; they are the true heirs of Abraham, the true people of God.

But John calls them a *brood of vipers*: they are children not of faithful Abraham but the faithless progeny of snakes, children of Satan. These well-off, well-connected religious authorities live a lie. The Baptist culminates the long line of prophets who condemn Jerusalem's unrepentant elites who adhere to the law's outward purity but in their actions subvert it, denying justice to the lost sheep of Israel. They do all the sacrifices perfectly, but they forget that what God wants is mercy. They flawlessly maintain cultic purity, but forget that God wants the purity of heart that welcomes the stranger and cares for the widow and orphan. Their claim to good standing with God, in virtue of being Abraham's descendants? Big deal: God can make these *stones* into children of Abraham. God is coming, the God who demands true righteousness and purity of heart. Here comes the winnowing fork, the axe, the fire. Repent!

This dark warning is not just for a wayward first century Israel. We make it our own as we move into the season of Advent. Here in the first turn of the liturgical year we are called to be serious, to slow our time, to examine ourselves and know what it is to wait, unworthy, for the arrival of the God who has come and will come again. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, God's coming is not only a matter of glad tidings but, first of all, "frightening news for everyone who has a conscience."

Yet it seems to me that we miss what's most important in today's text unless we juxtapose it with John the Baptist's next appearance in Matthew's gospel. Soon after he baptizes Jesus, John is thrown in prison and Jesus heads back up north to Galilee, where he starts to call disciples and begins his ministry. Some time passes and John, still in Herod's dungeon, having heard about what Jesus has been doing, sends him a message: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" (11.2-3). This is surprising, in contrast to John's bold proclamation of Jesus as the one who was coming to mete out God's justice. Jesus' answer is that the facts of his ministry speak for themselves: "*Go ahead and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them*" (11.4-5).

Jesus' answer points to what must have led to John's loss of confidence. Jesus turned out *not* to be what John expected. Where's the winnowing fork, the axe, the unquenchable fire? What about the those rich, self-righteous bastards in Jerusalem getting what they deserve? And, while we're at it, how about seeing to it that this collaborator Herod who has me in this cell, and his filthy Roman bosses, get what's coming to them? How about that *Day of the Lord* we've been longing for? How about the vindication of Israel? John is not merely puzzled; he's perturbed at Jesus for not doing what he's supposed to do and maybe for not being what he is supposed to be. John's heart was set on something large, loud and destructive, but all he gets is these acts of mercy and words of love. He wants God's violent victory for his faithful people, the fateful comeuppance of the unrighteous.

The hoped for apocalypse is not materializing; all he sees is Jesus handing out indiscriminate forgiveness. Jesus is well aware of how the Baptist feels: “*Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me*” (11.6).

Particularly telling is what Jesus says next. He begins by speaking well of John, who is, after all, his cousin and his erstwhile supporter. He describes him as greater than all the prophets and even now he acknowledges him as the messenger sent ahead of him, preparing the way for him. Yet what he goes on to say is devastating. He essentially disowns John the Baptist: “*The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*” (11.11). John’s way of seeing things, his all too plausible view of what God should be doing, has no place in the very kingdom of heaven he once so boldly proclaimed. The sad irony is that, in the end, John is so much like the Saducees and Pharisees he so readily condemned. Like them, he is offended by the extravagant grace of God.

The passage that follows is admittedly enigmatic: Jesus speaks cryptically of the kingdom of heaven “*suffering violence*” and of the violent seeking to take it by force. I think he’s referring to John’s fervent hope that God’s kingdom arrive with a display of might that obliterates God’s enemies. It makes all the sense in the world to envision a just God destroying the unjust and setting the world to rights. It makes no sense we can fathom to think God will let us get away with murder, but that, quite precisely, is what he does. Advent calls us to repent, but that repentance can only be the turn of heart and mind to the God who was in Christ, God not as powerful avenger but as humbled, vulnerable

flesh. God putting himself in the way of our thirst for justice, our hatred, our violence.
The crucified God.

Helmut Thielicke wrote that whenever the New Testament speaks of repentance, always the great joy is in the background. It does not say, “*Repent, or hell will swallow you up,*” but “*Repent, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” The joy of that kingdom is founded not on the rightful destruction of the wicked, but on an unimaginable grace that saves us all, despite ourselves. Advent invites us to examine ourselves so we can renew our welcome of the Savior into our lives, honestly acknowledging the inner wounds of doubt and disbelief, recognizing the depth to which we regard God as inaccessible, indifferent, hostile, and acknowledging how often we've sinfully resigned ourselves to living with that. It asks us to admit that part of us that demands the kind of God John the Baptist wanted, and takes offense at the kind of God Jesus was. And it calls us into the impossible possibility of the kingdom of heaven, where seemingly ephemeral words of love and hope outlast all this world's mighty means of death.

To conclude: a prayer Dietrich Bonhoeffer composed for Advent:

Lord Jesus, come yourself, and dwell with us, be human as we are, and overcome what overwhelms us. Come into the midst of my evil, come close to my unfaithfulness. Share my sin, which I hate and which I cannot leave. Be my brother, Thou Holy God. Be my brother in the kingdom of evil and suffering and death. Come with me in my death, come with me in my suffering, come with me as I struggle with evil. And make me holy and pure, despite my sin and death.

Amen.