

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 4, 2016
Advent 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-8
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Last week as we entered this Advent season we saw from Matthew and Jesus that of all things the Church can ill afford in its midst, *complacency* tops the list. And yet, struggling against complacency is one of our greatest challenges, because it has been a long time since Jesus promised he would return.

During Advent -- and beyond -- God's people are to be vigilant, ready for Christ's coming, precisely because he has told us that he will come in the midst of the ordinary, everyday rhythms of our lives. He will come when least expected. So we must encourage each other. We must continue to preach the gospel in word and deed. As the cantors sang this morning, we must "at all times ready be."

Today we are introduced to John the Baptist, this surly and burly figure who appears in the wilderness. His message: Prepare the way. Make a straight road for the Lord's coming.

We've talked about this before, but it bears repeating. In John's day, roads in his part of the world were worse than bad. They were not paved or surfaced because the soil in Palestine was so hard it could easily stand the traffic of mules and oxen and carts.

There were, however, a few select roads in Palestine that were surfaced. There were a few roads that were built *by* the King, *for* the King. They usually led from Jerusalem to various parts of the country where the King might visit. They were built exclusively for the King's travel, and so they were called "The King's Highway." Before the King was due to arrive in a given area, advance notice would be sent out instructing people of that area to repair the King's Highway and to prepare for the King's impending visit.

Matthew tells us this morning that in a day and age when it had been a long time since God had visited the people, John the Baptist appears on the scene and tells the people: "Fix up the highway. Make the path straight."

And, of course, John is talking about more than a physical road. He's calling on people to do some road repair work on their hearts, to make repairs in their interior lives. To change how they see the world and others. To change how they relate to God, and to others.

Folks came from near and far to hear John preach, and many responded with faith and obedience. But when some of the most religious folk -- the Pharisees and Sadducees -- come to hear John and to be baptized, he gives them a rather cold reception. He calls them snakes and says to them: "Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God. Don't just say, 'we're

safe, we're descendents of Abraham.' That proves *nothing*. God can turn these stones here into children of Abraham."

What's going on here? Why does John treat the Pharisees and Sadducees so harshly? Of what are they guilty?

Of all the things God's people can ill afford, especially in this Advent season, *complacency* tops the list. But to complacency John adds a second danger. It is the danger of *presumption*.

The dictionary defines the word "presume" this way: *to take for granted, to assume; to act with unwarranted boldness*.

The attitude of the Pharisees and Sadducees can be summed up in this word *presumption*. They took for granted many things in their lives. They took God's mercy and grace for granted.

Their attitude was: "We're physical descendents of Abraham! We're part of the chosen people. We're participants in the covenant! Our place and position is secure!" These guys were relying on their *past accomplishments* rather than on *present fruitfulness* when it came to their relationship with God.

John calls them out with these words: "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Prove by the way you live that you have really turned from your sins and turned to God."

When I was a teenager, a man in my hometown went to the doctor complaining of chest pains. After running a battery of tests, the doctor sat him down in a chair and looked him straight in the eye and said: "Look, you're traveling down a dangerous lifestyle road. You need to quit smoking, quit drinking, and you need to lose 50 pounds. You need to change your diet. If you don't make some changes and you continue down this road you're on, you'll be dead in six months."

This man made a decision. At about that time, those of us in our small town started seeing him and his wife out walking. The teenagers in our town had a standard route that we would drive, it was about twenty blocks or so in the form of a square. A key rite of passage in our town was getting your driver's license, then "crusing the square" where you could honk at your friends and they would honk back in return.

And every day, rain or shine, while crusing the square you could find this man and his wife out walking the streets of our small town.

One day I asked this man why he and his wife were out walking all the time. He told me of his health problems, his old lifestyle, and how he had made a decision to quit smoking and drinking, to change his diet, and to start walking. So I asked him another question: How were you able to make such drastic changes in your life?

He responded: "When you sit across from your doctor and he tells you that unless you turn your life around you will be dead in six months, changing isn't as hard as you might think."

John's message to the Pharisees and Sadducees was similar to the doctor's message to this man in my hometown. It was a wake-up call. But if the man in my hometown had the attitude of the Pharisees and Sadducees' he would have said: "Ah, I'm not worried. I have a lot of doctors in my family tree. Someone will take care of me. Everything will be alright."

Of all the things God's people can ill afford (especially during Advent), complacency tops the list. But to complacency we must add *presumption*. The temptation to rely on past spiritual experiences or milestones while forgetting the need for obedience in the present. The temptation to take God's compassion and forgiveness for granted. And perhaps the most dangerous presumption of all: the belief that "there will always be tomorrow." There will be time later for me to make things right, to change how I relate to God and others, to straighten the interior paths of my life.

John speaks of a coming baptism, a baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. It is easy for us to associate this with judgment, which is not entirely wrong. But the image of fire in Scripture is not merely reserved for judgment, but also includes *purification, purging, and refinement*. And on this second Sunday of Advent, we

are free to open our hearts and to hear John's message with new ears. We are free to open ourselves to the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit, to shake off complacency and to lay aside presumption.

Gospel artist Karla Worley speaks about the Spirit's refining presence:

*There is a fire that sears the soul, there is a winnowing light
Kindled within, a passion begins, that draws us completely to its side.
One holy passion, one great desire,
Consuming and filling our hearts with its fire;
Burning away all that keeps us in sin,
'til we are changed, and all that remains is one holy passion for Him.*

*Why do we tremble to feel this love?
Why do our hearts still resist?
One fiery embrace, one look on His face,
And we forever are His.*

*Come, Holy One, Thy will be done;
In this moment, set our hearts on fire.* [From the album *Ever Faithful*, c. 1987, Star Song Records]

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you once again to shake off complacency, and to lay aside *presumption*. Open your hearts to the Spirit's refining power and presence, given to you in bread and wine. Then together, let us watch and wait his coming.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.