

A SOMBER SEASON'S JOY Matthew 3:1-12

Those somber and angry words of John the Baptist are a sermon for the Christmas Season!?? They certainly did not reflect the “Christmas spirit” which we try so hard to achieve. We like the recorded sounds of sleigh bells and happy Christmas carols such as “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” and “Joy to the World.” We want the odors of fresh cedar and pine and potpourri, the sights of Christmas tree lights, red bows, real and artificial candles and Rudolph with his red nose blinking. We want to experience the warmth of closeness with our families and friends. I am not just describing you; that is the way I would like Advent and Christmas to be: Cozy, warm, happy and exciting.

But if we are going to preserve that kind of mood, we need to stay away from this text in Matthew 3. In fact, when you look at *any* of the passages which have traditionally been used by the church in the Advent season, you will find in them a dark, somber and threatening note. Oh, there is joy also; but the first emphasis is something else. There is a passage which speaks of the Lord coming suddenly, like a thief in the night – last Sunday’s Gospel reading. In fact, a number of the passages have to do with things taking place in the night or darkness. Then, there are those passages which depict John the Baptist standing out there gaunt against the overcast desert sky, his hair and shaggy clothing whipped by the wind and dust, shouting, “Repent! Repent!”

There is one Advent passage which talks about blindness, deafness, skin diseases, death and poverty. Finally, there is the nighttime passage about the birth of the child, Jesus, whose very name alludes to sin.

When you go the hymnbook, you find the same thing. Several of the hymns for the season of Advent are written in a minor key and have a somber mood about them. Listen to a sampling of the words:

“Ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here.” “Disperse the gloomy clouds of night.” “With fear and trembling stand.” “The race that long in darkness pined.” “No more let sins and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground.” When you examine even a carol such as “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” you discover the following words: “dismay, Satan’s power, astray, fear and Satan’s might.”

Moreover, when you look again at some of those bright and cheerful aspects of our contemporary Christmas celebration you find that same somber dimension. Take Rudolph, for instance. In the original story there was nothing cheerful or happy about his bright nose. It was a deformity, and because of it “all the other reindeer used to laugh and call him names; they never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games.” That brings us close to the heart of the reason for the somber note of the Christmas story. You see, what Advent and Christmas is really all about is the coming of love and justice into a hateful and unjust world.

A world in which normal reindeer make fun of abnormal ones, in which refined people look with disdain upon those who live on public assistance, in which undisciplined human beings abuse God's beautiful creation in the name of "development," a world in which people ridicule, denounce and even physically attack those who hold political or theological views different from their own.

The Bible makes abundantly clear the fact that the Christ who came in Bethlehem and who is still coming in Spirit into our world and who will come again in final victory at the end of time comes to heal the blind and lame and sick and to raise up those who are down and to liberate those who are in captivity and to help those who are poor. The reason that fact cannot initially be good news to us is that we are the people who contribute to so much of that misery in the world, or at least do precious little to alleviate it.

We do it in our own families. We criticize. We put one another down. We make one another feel stupid and inadequate rather than building one another up. We do it in the kind of influence we exert on social and political policies by our prejudicial attitudes and words. For people among us who have little in the way of ambition or skill we tend to feel and to express much more contempt than we do compassion. We do it as national and ethnic groups. In Germany, white, neo-Nazis have begun to sing again "Deutschland Uber Alles" (Germany Above All) and to attack dark-skinned people and Jews.

In the U.S. we are witnessing a new “America First” campaign which is straightforward in the protectionist steps it seeks to take, against immigrants, especially non-Caucasian ones. Japan exploits our U.S. markets and protects its markets against U.S. products. Germany first. America first. Japan first.

All of this insensitivity in the family circle and in society and between ethnic groups and nationalities is sin, and the whole world is shot through with it. In the Bible the Messiah is presented as one whose compassionate anger is inflamed by such things. He comes in Malachi as “re-finer’s fire.” He is presented in the Gospels by John the Baptist as coming with his “winnowing fork” to separate the wheat from the chaff and in Luke 2 the angels sing, *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased.*

God is not pleased with those of us who either contribute to or condone the injustice and deprivation and hurt which is so prevalent in our own homes and far away. And that is why seasonal songs which make of Advent and Christmas simply a bright and merry celebration distort the real meaning of the season.

But that is not the whole story. There is joy in this season – or at least the promise and possibility of joy - because, according to the Scriptures, the Christ whose compassion and justice judges us is also the Christ whose living Spirit can change us and save us.

“Fear not,” said the angel, “I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

One thing is pretty obvious. You are not going to experience salvation if you feel no need to be saved. Another way of saying that is this: If you are not conscious of the somber side of Christmas, of the darkness in your own heart, in your own attitudes, in your own words and behavior, in your own country and in the world at large, you cannot know anything of the joyful side of Christmas, the possibility of becoming a more compassionate, more caring, more gentle, more generous, and more loving person. Oh, you can have a Christmas that is more fun than the routine times of the year, that has more excitement in it because of the enjoyable family and social events and church and community things which we all enjoy; but you will not know anything about the real inward joy which this season holds within it until you confront and confess your own contributions to the darkness of life and then pray earnestly:

O Holy Child of Bethlehem descend to me, I pray. Cast out my sin, and enter in, be born in me today.

That prayer, prayed earnestly, will be answered. It may be answered dramatically, in a clear and instantaneous experience of the heart strangely and deeply warmed. It may be answered unnoticeably and gradually. But it will be answered, and you will be changed in the praying of it.

The awareness of its implications will quickly follow and acting on those implications will be occasions both for awkwardness, even pain but ultimately for joy. Saying something tender and loving to someone who has come not to expect that from you may not be an easy thing to do. The words may sound strange and feel awkward as they come from your mouth. But they will lead toward joy.

To take a more open and caring look at the kind of people with whom you have had little patience and for whom you have had no respect will not be an easy thing to do. You may even feel that you are compromising your principles. But it will bring you closer to Christ and lead you toward joy.

Dealing patiently and magnanimously with someone's rudeness and bullheadedness will not be easy, but it will contribute to a calm and well-being in the heart of you. I want for you the great joy which Christmas holds within it as a possibility. It can be yours, but not until you first hear and respond to that uncompromising desert figure shouting, "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," and until you then open your heart to that One of whom it was said by the prophet Isaiah:

He will not shout or raise his voice or make loud speeches in the streets. He will not break off a bent reed nor put out a flickering lamp. He will bring lasting justice to all. He will not lose hope or courage; he will establish peace on earth.