

Sermon for Advent II Sunday December 8, 2013 Matthew 3:1-12 "Get Ready"

If last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, was all about staying awake and being aware of the infinite possibilities that God has in mind for us, as demonstrated by the birth of his Son as a human being as a gift of love, then this Sunday, the second Sunday of Advent, is all about getting ourselves ready for those possibilities.

And who brings this message? It's Jesus' cousin John, who is a rather odd individual. Matthew tells us that he's been living rough in the wilderness, dressed in skins held together by a leather thong – no, not THAT kind of thong – and eating insects and wild honey. He's preaching a harsh message: "Clean up your act. Tell God you're sorry. You all are a mess. God is coming, and you must prepare yourself."

Preaching that is generally not something we hear much of these days.

We tend to be more gentle, more polite, more sweet, to use a Southern word with more levels of meaning than the Qumran scrolls. We want, on some level, to make our parishioners feel good, feel loved, so that we will feel loved right back.

John the Baptist preaches like he has a hangover and a bad case of hemorrhoids. Most of us priests do not preach like that. We preach sweet. We preach love. We preach comfort.

But does that do the job that preachers are called to do?

There's a great book by Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas and Methodist Bishop Will Willimon, "Resident Aliens." In it are these words: "One of us is tempted to think there is not much wrong with the church that could not be cured by God calling about a hundred really insensitive, uncaring and offensive people into ministry." They don't identify which of them is thinking that, although I have a pretty good idea on that, but that's not really important.

Why would two men of God say something like that?

Aren't we supposed to love each other and nurture each other?

True, but it raises the question: what do we want from the church? Do we want a cuddle or do we want the truth? Do we want a comfortable space where we feel like we're just fine, where we can pat ourselves on the back and think how nice we are because we come to church once a week? Or do we want to go into the wilderness to face the hard truths of who we are, what the church is and is not, what the world needs and what God expects of us? That's the message that Hauerwas and Willimon suggest might be conveyed by those insensitive, tough preachers. And we need to hear it, but we preachers are not always ready and willing to share it.

To be sure, it's a hard thing, this preaching work. We hear from our preaching professors about being prophetic (which translates to preaching like John the Baptist with a little more finesse and subtlety) in our sermons, and we are all fired up, and then we go to our parishes and what happens?

We priests hear people's stories and develop relationships with our parishioners, and we temper our message because we don't want to hurt people's feelings or cause them to dislike us. We chicken out. We are not prophetic. We are careful, and being careful is the kiss of death to good preaching.

Does that mean I should suddenly turn to you and start calling you a brood of vipers? Of course not. You're not vipers, and I'm not an eater of locusts and honey wearing animal skins. At the very least, if you're a viper, I'm probably one too.

But what it may mean for us, and for me, that we need to turn from the sentimentality that we are awash in right now, the nostalgia for a Christmas season that is probably much nicer in memory than it was in fact, and put ourselves into the wilderness to do the hard work of preparation for Jesus' birth. Advent is a time to get ready, and just like climbing up on ladders to hang the outdoor lights, just like braving the stores to buy presents, we have to take risks to get ready for the birth of God's only son.

And that requires some blunt language.

John says "Repent. The kingdom of heaven has come near."

I will be equally blunt.

If you knew that Jesus was coming for you in three weeks, what would you do to prepare yourself? Would you think about squeezing in a few items on your bucket list or would you think about trying to make peace with people from whom you have been estranged? Would you think about throwing a great big party or would you think about giving away your money and your stuff that you will no longer need? Would you think about pretending that Jesus isn't coming because it's too scary, or would you get down on your knees and ask God to help you do the real wilderness work, the real soul repair work, before it was too late?

We don't get to the stable and the newborn child without going through the desert wilderness. We don't get to celebrate until we understand the real meaning of the celebration. We don't get to sing of the angels and the shepherds without praying "come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel." We don't get to open the gift – the ultimate gift, the Son of God – until we prepare for what he will expect from us.

Jesus is coming. Get ready, not only with gift wrap and strings of lights and cookies, but with prayer, with meditation, with reading of God's story. Take a walk in the wilderness on your way to the stable. You'll figure out the way as you walk through the darkness, because off in the distance, the light in the stable will beckon you. Here's a secret: you wouldn't notice that gentle light without the darkness. So pay attention and get 'er done. Get ready. You're almost out of time. Get ready.

Amen.