

Advent 3B 2017 (December 17 2017)

Cathedral Church of St. John, Albuquerque

The Rev. Carolyn W. Metzler+

Isaiah 65:17-25, Ps. 126; 1 Thes. 5:12-28; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Long, long ago in a school far, far away, I had to read Alice in Wonderland. I never liked the book, but there is a line there which I love and carry with me. It's where the hookah-smoking Caterpillar looks at Alice and says, "And whoo are you?" Alice, who has been transformed several times replies, "I'm not sure, Sir. I thought I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then." I have days like that.

The people, who had long waited for the Messiah thought John might be he, so they asked him this Caterpillar question three times, in three ways, getting increasingly grumpy answers. Are you the Messiah? *I am not the Messiah*. What then--are you Elijah? *I am NOT!* Are you the prophet? *NO!* All right then, but if you're NOT the Messiah, and NOT Elijah, and NOT the prophet, then who the heck are you, and what are you doing here? "I am the voice of one crying: In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord!" He points only and always to Jesus.

So day after day John baptizes people with a baptism of repentance, and urging them to get ready for the one who is coming and already stands unknown among them. Repenting is part of our Advent work. To repent is to participate in our own liberation. It's not about how bad we are! It's about who we are called to be. When we dare to shake off those habits and attitudes which keep us in bondage to our puny little selves we are taking the first step toward to our own freedom. But first we need to recognize what needs repenting.

What are those things that enslave the whole human race? Do you know what those things are for you? Do you know what holds you hostage? Is it jealousy of someone who has more than you, either in things or in relationships or in status? Is it contempt for someone you think is less than you? Do you ever get nailed by self-pity, stuck in the poor me's or the "if only's"? Are you held prisoner by long-term anger, resentment at an injustice that has been done to you? Are you oppressed by fear that keeps you from loving fully? Maybe you're held down by an addiction to an activity--shopping, or TV, or anything that keeps you from facing some hard truths. Possibly you are too tied to the status quo to allow God to do anything new in you. And maybe it is despair that anything will ever change, ever be better. These are sins which beset all of us, the whole human race. There is not one of us who does not struggle with something on this wretched list at some time. Recognize those subtle, unconverted places within you; name them, own them, and then know in your bones the grace, mercy, and love of God.

The biblical prophets all remind us that we are accountable as a nation also. They are not preaching to individuals. They always address the king, the community, the nation. The same sins which beset us individually are shared by the nation and the prophets name them: corporate greed, ignoring the widows and orphans, getting rich off the backs of the poor, supporting the agendas of power over justice, abusing power, disposing of the planet. These call for repentance.

And while we repent, we rejoice! Rejoice! Not only now, but rejoice always! Welcome to the Episcopal Church, where you can use the words “Repent” and “Rejoice!” in the same sentence! You just read those instructions! Give thanks in all circumstances! Really? Is he kidding? The war on terror is not going well. We wake up each morning to headlines of bombings, natural disasters, school shootings, and corruption in high government. The oceans are in serious trouble. So in the midst of all the suffering of the world, how do we infuse our Advent waiting with rejoicing?

It might help to look again at our lesson from Isaiah, so full of goodness, gladness, hope! I believe that rejoicing is subversive work. Rejoicing refuses to believe in the triumph of evil. Rejoicing claims that God’s purposes will enfold us all, not just someday, but even now. Rejoicing forbids the demon despair. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is fear. Rejoicing describes Advent hope, which we are called to practice all year long. Listen again to Isaiah:

He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to captives, release the prisoners; to comfort all who mourn, to give them a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; They will build up the ancient ruins, the devastations of many generations.

Talk about comfort and joy! This is God’s agenda, in which we are invited to participate!

Good people, creation is still in process. It isn’t a done deal! Advent waiting asks for our *participation in ongoing creation with God*. God involves us, includes us in all that God does. God is still speaking, and needs our voices to proclaim God’s love. God is still building, and needs us to take a hammer and some nails and put the roof on. Imagine! The Creator of all things entrusting the creation process to us who are also still in formation! God trusts us to be God’s hands and feet and voice and compassion in the world while God continues to be at work in us. We change even while we are part of changing what’s around us! We are waking up, coming alive even as we care for each other’s growth, this community, and the world.

The people who were waiting for a political messiah were also right. God’s kingdom is a kingdom of justice, where everybody has enough to eat, has adequate health care and shelter. In God’s kingdom everyone is free to become who they were created to be. Everyone is respected, regardless of their skin color, language spoken, sexual orientation, their way of praying because everyone is a child of God. This is a political agenda based on God’s love. The world is not divided into spiritual and secular, where the church deals with the lofty sacred and ignores the problems. When we pray “Thy Kingdom come,” that’s what we commit to working for! If we are to follow Jesus, we must also be about the work of Jesus, engaged in the heartbreaking and backbreaking work of peace and justice. Justice is nothing more than good spirituality with its skin on. It’s not claiming that “God is on our side” but being concerned with whether or not we are on God’s side! That, good people, is the work of holiness. John calls to us now from the river of baptism: Live as though God inhabits every moment now, not just some day. God’s Kingdom is in process, and that is why we can rejoice.

I composed this sermon during a five day migraine when rejoicing was at the bottom of my to-do list. And I won't even tell you how the plumbing backed up! But it reminded me that rejoicing takes practice, like love takes practice even when we don't FEEL it. It takes practice like learning the piano. Rejoicing is an attitude of hope held even in the middle of darkest times. Rejoicing is not "Fa la la la la;" it is the gutsy and courageous conviction that God will be God no matter how things may appear. It is the dogged trust and that God will use even us to fulfill God's promises.

Rejoicing is an essential part of our faith. St. Teresa said "God deliver us from gloomy Christians." When I hear confessions I often give as a penance that glorious verse from Psalm 18: "God brought me out into an open place; he rescued me because he delighted in me." Delighted! Do you know how God delights in you? Do you delight in God?

So--when the smoking Caterpillar asks, "Whoooo are yoooo?" We have our answer. We are not the Messiah. He has already come. We are the ones who joyfully embrace all creation even in its suffering. We are the community which seeks to participate with God in creating safe home for all God's creatures. We are the ones who do the hard work of allowing God to convert us in the darkest, most hidden places of our heart. We are the ones who stay in community because we need each other to be faithful. And we are the ones who look for the coming of the Holy One in each moment--as we gather here in worship, as approach the altar with our empty hands outstretched, as we scatter back to our homes to love people in this world so hungry for love. We know God goes with us, within us, before us, and in spite of us. That's who we are. Amen.