

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 2nd SUNDAY OF ADVENT A
Isaiah 11: 1-10 Psalm 72 Romans 15: 4-9 Matthew 3: 1-12

By: Jude

Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

A woman I know, a grandmother with lots of grandchildren, likes to get a jump on Christmas. Before Thanksgiving, she says, she gets all her Christmas decorations up. This way, she reasons, the house will be warm and cozy for her family when they gather for Thanksgiving turkey at her house. Though she has the house looking like Christmas before Thanksgiving, she is quick to clean things up. The day after Christmas she clears out the decorations and tree. She likes a clean house as the new year begins.

She does keep a clean and orderly house. Her family is close knit and she's right, the Christmas decorated house makes for a lovely Thanksgiving setting for her clan. But her house decorating plans run counter to what we are doing in church this season. It's not Christmas yet. It's Advent and there are no Christmas ornaments and decorations to be seen in our worship space these days. In fact, things are quite sparse and austere. My grandmother friend might object to the "feel of the place." She would be right, the tone here stands in stark contrast to the shopping mall store windows and her own home. To compound the contrast, who shows up this day at our front door but the strangely-attired and austere-voiced John the Baptist. If he came knocking at our door we might open the door just a crack, look him over, be startled by his tone of voice and send him on his way—securely locking the door after him! Then we would return to family and friends inside, refresh the wine glasses and hot cider mugs and, when asked about the pounding on the door and the gruff sounding voice, we would say, "Oh, that was some street person, probably looking for a handout." We just might behave that way if John came-a-calling.

But had we given John a few more moments of our time, we would have realized he wasn't looking for a hand-out from us; instead, he came bearing a hand-out from God. First, he would have started with a clearing-out session. "Get rid of all those cozy Christmas decorations, it's too soon for that! Anyhow, God's not into cozy." Then, John would want, as he does in today's gospel, that we clear a space

for a word from God. Neither we nor our world is ready for the in-breaking of God into our lives. That's why John's voice sounds so strident today. To the Pharisees and Sadducees, who came to his baptism, he shouts, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"

Were the religious leaders coming merely as spectators; or were they actually there for John's washing? If they were sincere, why is he so accusing towards them? That's no way to treat worshipers who come to our services, is it? If they were there just to be part of the religious ritual, John tells them in no uncertain terms, that's not enough. (No one would ever fault John for soft-pedaling his message!) Instead, he warns the Pharisees and Sadducees, what's required is a change of life to properly prepare for the One who is coming after John.

At the opening of the passage, Matthew tells us that today's scene takes place in the desert. He is writing for a largely Jewish Christian audience and his allusion to the desert would stir up religious memory for them. They would recall Israel's original sojourn in the desert when God first delivered the people and called upon them to humbly rely on God's power, not their own, to save them. Once again, large crowds ("At that time Jerusalem, all Judea and the whole region around the Jordan...") were making another journey into the desert. They sensed John was more than a scraggy street preacher shouting dire warnings of impending doom at them. Matthew signals John's uniqueness by describing his manner of dress and food. John wore "clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." It's a description of a prophet, indeed, one reminiscent of Elijah (Cf. I and II Kings). The people sense in John that God was sending a great prophet and so their hopes and hearts are stirred.

When the people went out to John and were baptized they acknowledged their sins. John must have seen other motives in the Pharisees and Sadducees. Perhaps they were merely curious, or were just planning to go through the ritual, with no subsequent changes in their lives. John senses their lack of sincerity and so he launches his invectives against them saying that God wants more than religious ritual. God is inviting them to another desert experience: they must leave behind old ways and turn to God for forgiveness and a new heart.

And so must we respond to John. Unlike Lent, Advent is not primarily a season that stresses sin and contrition. But, judging from John's words today, Advent

does require a change in our lives. Confession of sin—certainly—but more. We must change in a way that will more faithfully attune us to God’s word. John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that religious observance isn’t an automatic pass. Nor can they claim a privileged place before God merely because they are descendants of Abraham. God wants, John says, a fresh hearing and open ears from us. Coming to church regularly, having our children baptized and even volunteering a bit is not enough to clear away the cobwebs of habit and laxness. The old stuff must be cut down, “at the root,” so God can come to renew and reignite the intense heat of God’s love and call in us. Who knows what newness God will bring into our lives if we make space this Advent?

John expects a forceful show on God’s part and he tells those who think he is the expected One that he is not. He steps aside and waits with his hearers to see what God has planned. This gruff prophet dominates the mid-section of Advent this year. Next week he will return. We’ll hear his voice, not from the edge of the Jordan, where we find him today, but from prison. He will send his disciples to see if Jesus really was the One he preached about. We will sense his disappointment in his inquiry. Jesus was not quite the firebrand John was or anticipated. As it turns out, God is in charge and is directing how the new age will come and what shape it will take. John had the good sense to step aside and let God move in. He invites us to do the same today, to trust the life that will grow where there once were dead branches. God wants to get to our roots where new life can start. John urges us to let God have more room to work in our lives.

There’s a lot of clearing away our world needs to do. As we look around we see what seems to be insurmountable evil forces: unrelenting wars and civil strife, unjust economic policies and the growth of poverty, nuclear proliferation, massive trading in arms around the world, an AIDS pandemic, slavery, starvation, high childhood mortality rates, environmental degradation and on and on. We want to stay with whatever struggle against these evil forces and others we are currently engaged. But our efforts are fatiguing and we risk giving up. John points us to the One who is coming to baptize us with the Holy Spirit. We will need that Spirit and fire so we don’t grow discouraged when we look around and see how little or slowly change is happening. With the Spirit we cry out this Advent, “Come Lord Jesus!”

But John the Baptist does knock at our doors in a more personal way this Advent.

The camel-hair clothed prophet wants admission to our own homes and hearts. His voice is joined by Isaiah's. Both invite us to pray for the gifts of the Spirit this Advent: "...a spirit of wisdom and of understanding; a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord..." John tells us to "produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance." And Isaiah suggests what those fruits might be, "...judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the land's afflicted." Biblical justice demands that the poor and outsider be welcomed and cared for: Isaiah reminds us that God sides with the poor and disenfranchised—and so should we Advent-ready people.

When we open our door to the Advent prophets, especially John the Baptist, our first reaction is to slam it shut immediately. We don't want our interior and exterior decorum upset by any indecorous sounding words. But Advent is a time to take a chance, let the vagabond John in. After all the fuss he makes about changing our ways, we hear, as we always do, that God is coming to our side with Spirit and fire, to help us in the very changes we are attempting.

Knock, knock. Who's there? John the Baptist, with some bad news—you have got to change. And some pretty good news too---God is coming to help with those changes.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

James A. Wallace, CsSR, Robert P. Waznak, SS, Guerric De Bona, OSB, *LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS: HOMILIES FOR THE 'A' CYCLE*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), ISBN, 0-8091-4288-0, paper, \$18.95.

Three gifted preachers take us through this liturgical year with homilies that reveal pastoral sensitivity, imagination and solid liturgical grounding. For parishes that have faith-based, small community catechesis, each homily is accompanied by "Questions for Reflection" which would be useful for group reflection. After each homily there are also "Other Directions for Preaching," which suggest another tack for the preacher. The book just arrived in the mail and I like what I see.

QUOTABLE

It is an unfortunate but real fact that this season is one of the most anxious times of the year. What to buy for her? For him? For them? How will I find time to do my Christmas cards? Should we invite them for Christmas dinner or not? How can I put on my Christmas lights when I haven't yet raked the leaves? 'tis the season to be very anxious.

There are more suicides, more family fights, more cardiac arrests than at any other time of the year. We owe it to ourselves to live Advent not just in church but also in our daily lives.

A true Advent will bring us a true Christmas.

A true Advent will allow us to hear not just voices of anxiety but voices of hope.

A true Advent will help us to make a U-turn , a change in our lives, a turn to the One we are expecting and who is already in our midst, Immanuel, God with us.

—Robert P. Waznak, SS in, LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS..., page 10.

JUSTICE NOTES

Frequently when they attacked me for being involved in politics, I used to say, I wish I knew what Bible they were reading! Because the Bible I read was quite clear: God revealed God to the children of Israel, not in a sanctuary, but by carrying out a political act—freeing a bunch of slaves. Nothing could be more political. And yet it was also deeply religious. They then realized that the God who does this kind of thing must be a God who cares, who is biased in favor of the weak, the oppressed the marginalized.

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu, quoted in, THE LIVING PULPIT, October-December 2004, page 47.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

John H. Fleming #0571536 (On death row since 4/8/97)
Samuel Flippen #0130851 (5/26/97)
Rowland Hedgepath #0176701 (7/3/97)
-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)
3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org
5. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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