

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (B)
DECEMBER 5, 1999

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11; Psalm 85; 2 Peter 3: 8-14; Mark 1: 1-8

Dear Preachers:

There is an element of over-familiarity about this season of Advent. First of all, it is so Christmas- oriented. It feels like, "here we go again, "the same old Christmas card list, the rushed chores and the usual guests to invite to the table. We are familiar with it by now. But is it the same? Is it so predictable after all. How many changes have we made since last year in our address book? How many new-borns this year? How many "first-days" of high school, or college, or the "first day" at a new job? What about the loved ones who are no longer with us? Who would have, could have, predicted all this? Life has taught us that the events of our lives are not dependable, not as predictable as they first seem. Turns out things are not the same. At the heart of our lives, there is no predictable routine after all. Not in the areas that really count.

So, where does Advent find us this year? Advent, the word means "coming"--to what does our God come into this time in the cycle of another Advent and Christmas? Without God, where would we look amid all the changes for stability and assurance? What's really fixed in our lives? What's so sure after all? We want some pattern of familiarity, but down deep, we're aware it feels like life is a toss of the dice. Will we come up winners this next year? Where will next Advent find us? What will be changed, what and who will be gone? To what and to whom do we cling amid what is not so sure after all? Without God, what are our chances for surety?...for something really reliable?

What is dependable and sure are not the events, but the surprising ways God finds to come back into our lives again and again. Can you hear the promise of John the Baptist today; his voice in barrenness and in the empty places. He calls out to us from what feels like desolation, the desert places in our lives. Accustomed to its harshness, he sees our need and makes a promise to us. One is coming (at this moment? this Eucharist? this period of our lives?) who comes with power to breathe a Spirit of God over us and transform us. Who or what else will be our surety, our journey companion in what lies ahead? The events of our lives are not dependable; God is. Here is a desert experience: a woman , who just went through a terrible losing battle with her husband's cancer, said that through it all she felt the

most profound experience of the intimacy, the presence of God, each step of the way. It wasn't a feeling of warmth, it wasn't cozy, but it was God, she is sure of it. "A voice cries out in the desert, prepare the way of the Lord."

The dependable One is reaching out to us today through John the Baptist, inviting us to repent. John is preaching to the "chosen people" the very message they preached to others. None of us is superior to the others, there is no room for smugness, no room to look at others we consider inferior. Here is John's invitation to repent of our useless patterns of living, to be honest about ourselves, to stop maintaining an illusion of innocence. Doing this welcomes in the God of this Advent, the God who will be our dependable source for our newly-born life. If we are ever going to the manger, get to experience the "Spirit of Christmas," we need to pass through this deserted place, free ourselves of distractions, so that we can hear his call to put aside our guises of respectability and independence and claim our dependable God.

I may be spreading the spirit of Ebenezer Scrooge...but here goes. The times are very good here in the States. It's the longest period of financial good times in the history of our nation. No downturn in sight either. Even the increase in oil prices has made only a dent in the stock market. Looks like we are going to get what we want for Christmas, and so are the manufacturers and merchants. Here's the Scrooge part: the Pokeman craze and its effects on kids. It's an example of the season and how much it costs to get into its "spirit"—especially if you are a kid or are parents of young ones. In case you have been living on the moon these months---- Pokeman is a craze sweeping the country. The movie was released last month and set records even though it opened on a Wednesday, a school day. It started last year as a Nintendo video game and then was expanded to comic books, T-shirts, action figures, bean bags and of course, collectors' cards. We are not talking baseball cards in penny bubble gum, but packs of cards costing between \$9 and \$12, geared to kids between 5-12. Even the promoters of all this are stunned by the success of Pokeman. They are milking it too. The cards have 151 animal-like characters, and these characters evolve into new ones. The hero of the game is Ash, a 12-year-old, and his goal is to capture all the characters—and then, of course, the new ones, as they appear. Kids just HAVE to have the cards, not just a few, but all the cards. By the end of the year it is expected Pokemon, in all its manifestations, will earn \$6 billion worldwide. (There is one 8th grader in Toronto who has set up his own anti-Pokemon webpage. He said, "It all feels like a scam to take our money." Smart kid.)

The Pokemon tag line is “Gotta catch ‘em all.” Sounds like the way we adults approach this season in the midst of its boom. Then how come we are not happy? Even the fashion models in the ads look dour. It feels like a desert out here. Why isn’t all that we have and can get making us happy? How come we can’t buy the happiness we want? “Gotta catch ‘em all.” And when we think we have, we still come up empty.

The Gospel beings in another kind of desert, stripped of noise and distractions. John the Baptist touches into their hungers. God has noticed them and sends a powerful prophet to speak to them and invite them to a new way to live with new choices and new goals. John asks for repentance. Hardly sounds like an attractive “sales pitch.” But they come out in droves to hear him and accept his invitation to repent. That’s what they need, a chance to admit they are feeling the forces of other powers. The good news for them is that they can admit their need, ask for repentance and be forgiven. The passage puts it in the right order: first repentance, then, “for the forgiveness of sin.” One follows the other, no doubt about that. John Kavanaugh (see bibliography) says that repentance means we have hope. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Things don’t have to be this way forever, they can change, I can start over again. The birth of the coming Savior also means the rebirth of my fatigued and bloated spirit. Kavanaugh says that when John speaks about “one mightier than I...”, it’s like an A.A. meeting: we cannot save ourselves so we submit “to a higher power.”

The preacher may want to focus on the notion of "the beginning" that is in the first line of Mark's Gospel and the first line of today's passage. What is "beginning" in this moment? God is doing something new. Notice that "all the Judean countryside" is going out to hear about this beginning. There is an inclusive note in it since "all" are getting a chance to hear it. There is no initial selection process, no screening going on, no prior qualifications. Everywhere else in life we have to measure up---have credentials. Here anyone who feels a need to hear can respond. None of us is better than the other, we all need forgiveness. We have gone searching elsewhere and have come up empty.

Jesus is the "beginning" of new possibilities and God is doing something new for us in him. But there is a past to this “beginning” that goes all the way back into the Hope of the Jewish people to have a second beginning, a new creation. God comes with power to save us from our helpless entanglements and enables us to start

anew.

Where does the Christmas story begin? It begins at this early stage of our preparations. We are still in an early moment of Advent, still thinking and hoping for a new beginning that will enable us to celebrate the birth of the Savior with deep gratitude for what God has done for us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

John F. Kavanaugh, *THE WORD ENCOUNTERED: MEDITATIONS ON THE SUNDAY SCRIPTURES*. New York: Orbis Books: 1996. Paper.

These are excellent reflections on the Sunday readings in the B cycle, so it's a good time to get this book, the B cycle has just begun with this Advent. He has a sensitivity to the scriptures and how they speak to the modern world. He also brings to his observations a keen sense of justice. He used to write reflections like these in *AMERICA* magazine and I found those very helpful, I think the book matches their quality.

WREATH

Advent, 1996

Tonight, we will circle
the tall trunks of these candles
with a wheel of pine and cedar,
twine spring of Veni, Veni
into this compass with many needles
pointing us to what's been lost,
scattered to the periphery
of its open-coned center.

In weeks to come
we will light with the awestruck matches
of our tongues a Word waxing unseen
to the waning of these tapers;
a branch pushing through
the undergrowth of our waiting
that fires withing us
this burning toward the green.

Daniel Mills, quoted in *SOJOURNERS MAGAZINE*, Nov.-Dec 1997

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

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)

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",
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