

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT (C)
Zephaniah 3: 14-18 Is. 12: 2-6 Philippians 4: 4-7 Luke 3: 10-18
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: The question a couple weeks ago about children and Christmas mass brought a lot of responses. More are included at the end of this edition. Thanks for all the responses. More next week.

The past two Sundays have featured John the Baptist. I would like to focus these reflections on John and point to the ways he is featured in these Advent Gospel readings.

John the Baptist is clearly connected to the long prophetic tradition. Luke raises up John as a link between the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. He's of the priestly family, yet he wears the camel's hair and leather belt of the prophet, reminiscent of Elijah. He denies his own importance, claiming he is just at voice. As we saw last week, (the 2nd Sunday in Advent) he is a link between Isaiah and Jesus. He is popular among the masses and Jesus extols him as the greatest "among those born of women" (7:28). John is a strong, critical voice against the indulgences of the current society and he calls for a radical change by all, especially those who wield influence. After a preaching characterized by scathing criticism and a call to reform, he is still described by Luke today as preaching, "the good news to the people," for he is painting the arrival of the Messiah who will initiate a new reign where the people will be forgiven, healed and saved.

John the Baptist, the stern and uncompromising preacher, challenges our superficial attempts at change and helps us go deeper. Only the coming of our God can free us from what enslaves us, can drive out the all-pervasive darkness that touches even the deepest crevices of our lives and bring to bear the longed-for salvation. John's voice in Advent is urgent, for he also sees God breaking into human history with judgment for those who, for so long, had violated the covenant. Last week he warned that what is crooked must be made straight; what is rough smooth. This making right of our lives is how we are to prepare for God's arrival.

It's customary for us to look to Jesus' more soothing style and gentle ways. We would quickly, perhaps too quickly, brush John off the Advent stage. But in this

liturgical year we can't do that so easily since he appears in the selections from Luke on two of these four Advent Sundays. There he is, shaking us out of our complacency. He forces us to look at our self-satisfaction and false securities. Where have we placed our security; on what are we relying? We live in an age of genocide, ethnic purging and starvation for many of the world's peoples. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has us despairing that there will ever be peace in the Holy Land. Meanwhile, for the few and privileged, there is opulence, technological wizardry, indulgence and cravings that are showing themselves once again during the shopping season.

John the Baptist was very rooted in the prophetic tradition which sees Yahweh as the source of our hope. John, the Gospel tells us, was "sent from God" (John 1: 6). God sees the people's need and comes to rescue them. We have reason to hope and look forward eagerly to our redemption, because God is reliable, ever faithful to us. The description of God's coming is disturbing because John says God's advent will be with judging fire. God will come judging and healing.

There is a mighty One coming, John tells us, and there are preparations for his arrival. The Advent readings do not advocate a mere posture of waiting. Rather, our work is to repent. This repentance is not a private or internal affair only. Today, John tells the crowd to share their coats and food; he tells tax collectors not to cheat on what they collect and soldiers not to do violence. Repentance was a call to return to being a covenanted people; this would make "the rough ways smooth" (2nd Sunday of Advent). The One coming will proclaim the reign of God, a community living together under God's rule of peace, justice and in harmonious living. To prepare we need to straighten out our lives.

Taking John's cues, we can say that simply living honest lives is a good start. We look to our relationships and our responsibilities: ruptures are to be mended; frictions addressed; family responsibilities faced; work done honestly; employees treated justly. Start where you are, John says. Our domestic and social houses are to be put in order. The One who is coming will speak on God's behalf, the God who said in Isaiah (61:8), "For I the Lord Love justice, I hate robbery and wrong." John's Advent voice is a one of sobriety that runs counter to the intoxicating voices around us. He calls for rectitude and social consciousness; while the malls are staying open later to feed our endless thirst for consumption.

However, John isn't just negating everything and sounding doom. After

addressing the consciences of hearers, after challenging them to broaden their awareness to include the poor (share cloak, and food he tells them); after telling soldiers to be fair and not extort those over whom they have power; after calling his listeners to life-altering changes, his listeners are not discouraged or gloomy. Rather, they are “filled with expectation.” Something good is about to happen to them, and it is so good they can stop clutching possessions to themselves, they can stop manipulating things to go their way. One is coming who will bring them their deepest desires, quench their thirst for fulfillment. We read the prophets’ pointing to a time of fulfillment. And we see Christ as that fulfillment. But we need to be careful and read the historical fulfillment in Christ with sensitivity. For Christ himself points to a future for us, Israel, the church and the entire world--- a future when all shall be complete.

John calls his hearers to common sense change. Anna Quindlen is a Pulitzer Prize author and writes a biweekly column in NEWSWEEK magazine. She has a new book (A SHORT GUIDE TO A HAPPY LIFE) in which she doesn’t address people’s finances and careers, her usual writing domain. Rather, while respecting people’s need to work, develop their careers and put food on the table, she reminds her readers that a career is not our identity. She calls for developing meaningful relationships. She understands that many people must work two or three jobs for survival but, she says, there are a lot of people of comfortable means who have made work their identity and let their family relationships and friendships suffer as a consequence. She warns that one day these people are going to look up and notice that their lives are empty and significant people are no where to be found. I hear in such modern voices a warning similar to the one John addresses to his hearers. Look at your lives. What must be changed so as to put first things first?

We also remember that we look on Advent from the vantage of our Easter faith, lest we miss, with the disciples, the significance of Christ’s simple birth and his words and actions. We celebrate his birth knowing how the story will end; God has been faithful and has kept promises. But the first part of the season is about preparation. We focus, with the guidance of Luke, on the second coming of Christ. The Hebrew prophets prepare us over years of human history for the coming of the Christ. But Luke tells us, when Christ returns, it will be without warning. The Christ we are being prepared to meet, the one for whom we long, will come in fullness at the second advent, and we keep vigilance, holding the promises and faithfully living out of our hope, so that we will be ready when he returns.

The Jewish Community and our Celebration of Advent:

The first readings in our Lectionary have been chosen in light of the Gospel selection, because they “point to their fulfillment” in Christ. To put it simply, we see the promise in the Hebrew Scriptures (1st. reading) and the fulfillment in the New Testament (Gospel selection). But this treatment of the former texts does not do them justice. The Hebrew texts should not just be seen as preparing the way for Christ. The prophetic message they contain still speaks to our generation and we need to read them and appreciate the message they still hold for us.

Advent is an excellent time for the preacher to focus a preaching from the first readings. A useful publication for more reflection of this relationship between the two testaments and its consequences for our preaching, can be found in the Bishops’ booklet, ***God’s Mercy Endures Forever***. The helpful, **Sourcebook for Sundays and Season**, (Liturgy Training Publications) quotes the bishops’ document and can serve as a guideline for Advent preaching:

“The lectionary readings from the prophets are selected to bring out the ancient Christian theme that Jesus is the “fulfillment’ of the biblical message of hope and promise, the inauguration of the “days to come’ described, for example, by the daily Advent Masses, and on Sundays by Isaiah in Cycle A and Jeremiah in Cycle C for the first Sunday of Advent. This truth needs to be framed very carefully. Christians believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has come (see Luke 4:22) but also know that his messianic kingdom is not yet fully realized. The ancient messianic prophecies are not merely temporal predictions but profound expressions of eschatological hope. Since this dimension can be misunderstood or even missed altogether, the homilists needs to raise clearly the hope found in the prophets and heightened in the proclamation of Christ. This hope includes trust in what is promised but not yet seen. While the biblical prophecies of an age of universal “shalom” are “fulfilled” (i.e. irreversibly inaugurated) in Christ’s coming, that fulfillment is not yet completely worked out in each person’s life or perfected in the world at large.....It is the mission of the church, and also that of the Jewish people, to proclaim and to work to prepare the world for the full flowering of God’s reign, which is but is “not yet”....Both the Christian “Our Father” and the Jewish “Kaddish” exemplify this message. Thus, both Christianity and Judaism seal their worship with a common hope: □Thy kingdom come!”“

QUOTABLE:

“Advent is the season to take the barnacles off my Christian bottom--the obstacles that keep me from being enthusiastic in my faith and hope and love, too sophisticated to love God with all my mind and heart, all my soul and strength, too self-centered to love my sisters and brothers like other selves, as Jesus has loved me.....

It is not a question of giving up all that is dear to us--work and play family and sex--and heading naked for Mount Sinai or the Rockies to welcome Christ. It's rather how Christlike am I where I am, in what I do, with the people whose lives I touch? How do I handle the three main goals all too many Americans admit: money, power, fame? How do I relate to Christ crucified today--crucified in the children abused and the elderly unloved, in the AIDS-afflicted and the drug-addicted, in blacks still enslaved and Hispanics newly unwelcome, in the homeless and the hopeless in my own parish?”

---Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. in “the Living Pulpit”, (October-December 1997).

MORE SUGGESTIONS FROM OUR READERS FOR CHRISTMAS CHILDREN'S MASS:

My suggestions for Christmas Children's Mass....

1. Rather than a pageant I select one family who has a child about to receive First Communion -- one year from Faith Formation Program, next year from Grade School. The child carries in the Baby Jesus with family in the entrance procession and they sit in the front pew.
2. During the Alleluia I move over to the crib scene. It is possible for me to sit on the step-in front of the scene and see most of the Church. I then invite all the children to come forward and sit around me. I then read/tell the Gospel story with frequent interruptions, questions, comments directed to the children. At the time we read of birth, I take the Baby Jesus from the child or invite child to place in Crib.
3. We invite the children to bring a wrapped gift for our shelter for women and children. This gift is placed around the Crib as children leave.
4. The above family also brings the gifts forward.

----Ted Hottinger, S. J. SS Peter & Paul Parish Mankato, MN

Christmas Children's homily:

One Christmas I gathered all the kids in the sanctuary -- a bit of a challenge and talked about the Christmas story but used the light of the star as the central point. Asking them about stars and stuff. Then I gave each of them with the help of others a single candle (small vigil light style -- like we use to use before electric candles). I asked them to bring it home and light it on Christmas day when they gathered for dinner and tell everyone at the dinner table the story of Jesus. It was well received.

----Peter Dooley, Bellmore, NY

As an alternative to the practicing, memorization, and general chaos of a Christmas pageant, an inter-generational, "spontaneous" pageant can be a wonderful thing. I have seen this done by recruiting some adults to meet families as they come into church and to invite them --children and adults-- to don the costumes and take their places in the chancel area. No one is required to "dress up", but you get a mix of young children and grandmas, and everyone in-between gathered around the baby Jesus for the telling of the Christ story. This also diminishes the "isn't he cute" affect and parental picture-taking and encourages the whole community to live out the story together.

-----from Greg and Gay

The Introduction to the Lectionary for Masses with Children, no. 54 notes that "The fullest reality of the liturgical assembly is children and adults together - not separate celebrations which run the risk of diminishing the place of children in the liturgical assembly."

----Veronica Rosier, OP Australian Catholic University, Sydney

I don't have much to share except that I have found that the use of dramatic readers for a pantomime pageant is an easier way of presenting the story than having people learn parts.. Children can simply mime the parts with adults in costume who are so do the stage direction. This allows quite young ones to be involved with a minimum of practice time. There is some good material for this from WOODLAKE BOOKS in Vancouver. ----- John Hodgins

Advent Table Prayer

Lord God and giver of all good gifts, as we pause before this meal we
are grateful for all the blessings of life that You have given.

You willed your only Son to take flesh
in order that life might be restored to each of us.

Bless these gifts with which we are about to nourish our bodies.
Give us strength that we might wait in watchfulness
for the glorious coming of your Son into our lives.

Do not let the sights and sounds and busyness of this season
distract us from preparing for the real Christmas
which takes place within our hearts.

May your blessing---God of Light, Son of Glory and Spirit of Love--
be upon us during these days of waiting. Amen
(Source Unknown)

ADVENT WREATH, ADVENT, 1996

Tonight, we will circle
the tall trunks of these candles
with a wheel of pine and cedar,
twine springs 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 within us
this burning toward the green.

-----Daniel Mills in Sojourners, November-December '97

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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