

Advent 2, Year A, 12-8-13
All Saints Episcopal Church

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

In the name of the God who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

In the Godly Play Sunday School curriculum, each of the stories of one kind or another contain certain phrases that are often repeated with the same or very similar words. For instance, all the parables of Jesus begin one way; all the Hebrew Bible stories begin another way, etc. This is to help the listeners become as familiar as possible with them, and to be able to identify what kind of story it is they are hearing. The Hebrew Bible - or Old Testament - is about the people of Israel, who spent a good deal of their time wandering about the desert. So whenever we have a desert story, the description of the desert sounds like this:

The desert is a dangerous place. It is always moving, so it is hard to know where you are. There is little water, so you get thirsty and you can die if no water is found. Almost nothing grows there, so there is almost nothing to eat. In the daytime it is hot and the sun scorches your skin. In the night it is cold. When the wind blows, the sand stings when it hits you. People wear many clothes to protect them from the sun and blowing sand. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go there unless they have to.

Out of this same hot, windy, sandy, empty, cold and dangerous place, came a crazy, wild-eyed, sideways-walking man. He was covered in camel skins, which probably came with their own fleas, and his hair was long and matted. He ate bugs and honey - an unusual diet to say the least!

This man - John by name - was a prophet.

It is important to remember that the job of a prophet is to be a spokesperson, not a fortuneteller. And the role of the prophet is to unmask pretense. Needless to say, that's not a task that people respond to with a warm, snuggly feeling. But prophets are necessary, and this man John arrived with locusts and vipers and axes and fire. He came like one of the furious storms that have been crossing the country this week.

His message to the people of Jerusalem and all of Judea was to repent - to turn toward God with a change of mind and heart. And they came to him to be baptized in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when John saw the Pharisees and Sadducees, he lost it: "You brood of vipers!" Not nice talk. He was mad with them because they claimed that their lineage - who their 'people' were -- was what made them worthy to be part of God's 'in-crowd.' So he told them that their claim of exclusivity wasn't going to fly - God could take stones and turn them into children of Abraham.

Isn't that what we do, too? We - and here, I'm talking about the church, but we could pick just about any other group as well - we are far too often guilty of thinking of ourselves as an exclusive society. We have received the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations, and it is a noble thing to do, but we can get stuck by presuming that it means to make others be like us and then try to overwhelm the world in 'clonal' triumph, as my friend Lane Denson used to say.

And if we expect that everyone is to be like us, we can easily get sidetracked into paying attention to where others stray from our ways, instead of paying attention to the even earlier and more important 'Great' - the Great Commandment - which is to love God and love our neighbors as our selves. This Great Commandment doesn't mean to love people who are like our selves, but to love our neighbors like we love our selves. And this all-inclusive community becomes a vision of the peaceful kingdom of which another prophet - Isaiah - spoke in the first reading this morning.

Isaiah's peaceful kingdom is a vision of what Israel will be like when life is restored from the stump that Israel has become - life restored by the coming of a Messiah. In this new life, the wolf and the lamb will live peacefully together, the leopard and kid will lie down together, the cow and the bear will graze side by side, the lion will eat straw like the ox, and a child will play safely next to a den of snakes. They will not hurt or destroy - peace will reign.

In this season of Advent, we prepare for the incarnation of Jesus by examining ourselves. Are we bearing fruit worthy of repentance? Where do we need to make room for the new shoot of Jesse to grow up within us? That is how we prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist is not preaching a message of condemnation, but

rather one of liberation, of freedom from the thick, choking overgrowth of sin that has trapped us in misery and hopelessness.

And what action does John take along with his message? Baptizing. Even as he pours down the fires of his words, he also pours out the gentle stream of water on the heads of the seekers at the Jordan River, blessing them with the cleansing stream that speaks of Living Water. He waters the potential of the believers, so that a new shoot of life might have the chance to grow from each one of them.

In Advent, the season of expectation and possibility, the spirit of the coming Christ is looking for fertile ground in which to grow up - a new shoot out of the old stump. Isaiah proclaims, that "on that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

In order for the peaceable kingdom of God, for which we long, to become a reality, let us put an ax to resentments and biases that are rooted in our hearts. Let us rid ourselves of greed and overindulgence; let us burn the chaff of our impatience. Only then will the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, the child and the cobra find rest under the widespread branches of a sheltering tree in the peaceable kingdom.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.