

Advent 2, Year A, 12-5-10
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 creates us, redeems us, and makes us whole.

In the Godly Play Sunday School curriculum, each of the stories of one kind begins a certain way. For instance, all the parables 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 of their time wandering about the desert. So all those desert stories begin like this:

This is the desert. The desert is a dangerous place. There is no food or water there. People can die in the desert.

When the wind blows, the shape of the desert changes. You can lose your way.

The sun is so hot that people wear many clothes to keep the sun from burning their skin. When the wind blows, the sand stings your face and hands. People need protection from the blowing sand. At night, it is cold, and you need many clothes to keep warm.

The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go there unless they have to.

Out of this same hot, windy, sandy, 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 had come to unmask a particular pretense.

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 are far too often guilty of thinking of ourselves - and here I'm talking about the church, but we could pick just about any other group as well - we're 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 like ourselves and then try to overwhelm the world in 'clonal' triumph, as my friend Lane Denson says.

But 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 necessarily commands us to become an inclusive community instead of an exclusive one. And this inclusive community becomes a vision of the peaceful kingdom of which another prophet - Isaiah - speaks.

In Isaiah's peaceful kingdom is a vision of what Israel will be like when life is restored to 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 snakes. They will not hurt or destroy - peace will reign.

In this time of Advent, we prepare for the incarnation of Jesus by examining ourselves. Where do we need to make room for Jesus who embodied and expressed

the peace, love and mercy that God wills for all people? Do we live our lives according to the faith we have in worldly things or according to our faith in the promises of God? How are we called to proclaim our deepest longing of peace on earth, wholeness for creation and an end to all violence?

The peaceable kingdom of God for which we long in this century may require first that "we put an ax to resentments and biases that are rooted in our hearts. We may have to winnow our greed and overindulgence; we may have to 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."

Come, Lord Jesus. May it be so.