

Advent III Year C

“Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

I’ve not seen the movie yet, but Clint Eastwood’s *Invictus* has opened in movie theaters and it sounds like it is going to be really good. The movie is based on a true story that took place in the early days of the presidency of Nelson Mandela in South Africa in the early 1990’s. The country was fractured by apartheid; violence was being committed country wide by rival factions, between races. The economy was rapidly sinking...Would the new Mandela government be able to rescue a society so wounded; would this new government even last...Would it have to use the means of force, intimidation and violence to ensure its preservation...should the opposition, the supporters of apartheid be punished?...Many of Mandela’s advisors thought as much...Mandela had a choice to make...He could entrench his presidency by the means of the status quo of force...of martial law and police action that the population had endured for decades...or would there, could there, be another way?

Well, we know the story...He chose the way of reconciliation and forgiveness...a way of healing the wounds of his country...a way seldom chosen by people in power....He chose *life-change* for his people...The movie *Invictus*, which means invincible, chronicles the exploits of the South

African rugby team in the early nineties and their unlikely accomplishment of making it to the Rugby World Cup Championship match...It was Mandela himself who challenged the team's captain and inspired the players that their performance, that their sport, sport a symbol of mutuality and collaboration... that sport could unify a fractured country, and engender a sense of pride in being a South African...that a common cause would engender unity, a unity *Invictus*... Invincible....this a remarkably creative choice by this visionary who had suffered 27 years of squalid imprisonment for his anti-apartheid activism....a time matured choice of the heart that bore and bears still great fruit.

To be human means that we are forever challenged to make choices...to have free will, free will a gift to be sure, but a gift that comes with profound responsibility...to be endowed with free will, we must forever choose.....not a once in a lifetime choice...but a lifelong art of choosing creatively...choosing predisposed to serving always the greater good.

John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel is challenging the people of Israel to choose...to choose between the way of Christ, the way of conscientious sacrifice, which will engender God's very Spirit in earth.... Or... choose the way of the status quo of Empire and occupation, and not just of empire, but of tradition and ethnicity as well, of institutional dysfunction... He tells the

people of Israel that they must repent, repent, look to the truth, look to take up your God-given humanity, which is to know the truth, and to know the choice.....Now there is a subtle point to be made here....The word for repentance literally means *life-change*....and it doesn't really mean: stop being bad and be good; or stop doing things this way and do them differently...though both those things may be a part of the process....but the word at its core has to do with enlightened choice...that when change comes, as it surely will...then in the midst of change, choose life, choose life we are told...choose life-change...not death-change...choose the way that will bring life and bring it abundantly....and these choices rarely come in the spectacular....Why do we look for God in the spectacular when God most always comes in the mundane...in the everydayness of our lives....but matters of life and death still...For John, the baptizer, the stakes couldn't be higher....our everyday choices, matters of life and death....and the choice is urgent.

It is our life's work, is it not, to practice the art of choice...to live into life-change...to live into change for life and not death....to participate in our world's unfolding as people who choose creatively the ways and the means that bring life, ways of greening, ways of blossoming and ways of fruit-bearing, John's metaphor....ways of compassion and mercy and kindness

and justice and healing...life change, Spirit fruit....or we could choose death, the ways that stand against this abundant life for which our loving God hopes for the world....the ways of greed and injustice and violence, the ways deadwood and death.

Luke's rhetoric is incisive here...he's in the proverbial mode of afflicting the comfortable...instead of comforting the afflicted...he's probably not getting many invitations for dinner... "the ax, he says, is already laid at the root of the tree...the time for choice is urgent, he tells us....the choices we make for life-change will bear goodness...and choices that hinder the life force we must cast off into the fire...This is Luke's rhetorical way of saying to his audience that the stakes borne in our choices couldn't be higher...and that the time is short.

Sisters and brothers, to live as people of faith, we must get good at choosing the good....that is what a church should be....a school for choice-making...a place in which we teach each other the art of life change....mature in heart together...no single one of us knows exactly how...but together as a community of enlightened Christian practice we will learn...and our choices will bear fruit...our choices will bear life-change...change for our world...life for our world, in our simple everyday choices....choices for the greening, blossoming and fruit-bearing of the

creation entire...one small choice at a time....a vocation worth celebrating, as we have done for millennia.

John the Baptist has gotten his audience's attention....they beg him to give them some examples of what sort of choices they should make...what are we to do; what sort of life-change they ask? And I suspect they want some spectacular answer...just as we look, when it comes to God, for spectacular answers....But he surprises...What shall you do? He asks...I'll tell you... If you have two coats, give one away...do the same with your food....don't extort....take only the share you've earned....no false witnessing or accusations, or violence....and be happy with what you have....simple....mundane....unspectacular....but profound beyond all reckoning.

The Gospel of Luke is often called a history of the Holy Spirit....Spirit that creates and animates the world and we in it. The biblical history of Israel, old and New Testament, an imaginative history of the Spirit indwelling a people....and this Spirit is one of life change....the power within us all, enriching our blood, to artfully, creatively and intelligently choose life...and to let go of the dead wood, and nurture the life-change...and Luke's implication is that to choose life in its myriad manifestations...to choose life in our daily living, simply choosing life.... is

to choose love...the way of life change is love's way....love's way, a way of artful sacrifice, of forgiveness and of mercy and of compassion and of non-violence....love's way in all choices that will bring life change to a world ever so ripe for it....change will come no matter what....Luke calls this change "the coming judgment"... change comes inevitably and not so slowly....and it is our call, people of the good way, to make choices for life amid a changing world beset with death...it is for us to choose life always....for to choose life is to choose love....this wondrous love that chose us first...Love that creates and transforms, Love eternal....Love invictus.!