

Advent III Year C

“One more powerful than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Behind the lights and the glitter and tinsel in our neighborhoods and shopping malls that gauze over the fact that we approach the darkest time of the year...behind the façade of what I would call a manufactured semblance of serendipity, an ersatz happiness, behind this fabricated world lurks the rough beast of violence which as you heard me read from W.B. Yeats two weeks ago....slouches towards Bethlehem to be born....It is a prophecy of doom and gloom for Yeats who envisions a world of anarchy and violence in the twentieth century and beyond...and he was right.

So why would I bring you such a morose message at this time of year when we are greeting each other these days in the name of happiness, as if the dark out there doesn't exist. For the past three weeks we have had to listen to Luke do the same thing. He's up in our face warning us of the coming catastrophe...he's warning the people of Israel that they must experience repentance, *life change*, my translation... so as to be able to stand against the powers of darkness.

I've heard countless sermons on waiting for our hope to take shape...waiting for God to act...sermons about how it is not in our modern mindset to wait; but nowhere in the synoptic gospels, Matthew Mark or Luke do these writers speak of passive waiting....they speak of active watchfulness and preparation in hope and expectation....all the while acknowledging that what we as humankind are up against is formidable...this dark of violence, fear its henchman, that stalks human and for that matter planetary existence.

In Luke's world, he witnesses his people being crushed by the brutality of occupation...from village to village, would be revolutionaries, or those merely suspected of it, hanging from crosses...Jerusalem razed, the Temple destroyed...and then the rumors of more war, more violence to come. He describes the human condition in the baroque apocalyptic genre... And the people pour out into the desert to ask this desert prophet named John, “What shall they ever do.” It is a question for every age when it comes to the evil that assaults our world, “what shall we ever do?” But as Luke tells us it is a question we ask in fervent hope...a great paradox to be sure...and that paradox lives on today.

The Middle East and the contingent Arab world is a powder keg, violence rearing its head in every quarter, in parts of Africa violence on a

rampage unchecked...in this country, yet another mass murder, 28 people in Connecticut just this past Friday gunned down with assault weaponry (that's another subject)...murders among teenagers and adults alike in various parts of our own city, and every city. And in our liturgical cycle in the church, here at the winter solstice, it is for us to ask, "What shall we do?"

John the Baptist in our passage for today, has an answer for the people. In Mark and Matthew, John the Baptist is speaking to the scribes and the Pharisees, the powers that be in Israel...but here in Luke he is speaking to the people, the crowd...he's speaking to everyone....and here in a literary twist Luke ceases using the apocalyptic language with which he began this diatribe...you know the moon and stars falling from the heavens...the very foundation of the cosmos shaken to its core...and then the Son of Man coming to earth in Steven Spielberg type clouds...instead he answers them in an improbable, mundane way...up and against this cosmos shaking violence and evil, he tells them three things....If you've got two coats, share one with someone who needs it and share your food...he tells the tax collector...don't cheat, only collect what's lawfully due...to the soldier he says, don't extort, don't shake down people, don't abuse the power entrusted to you...three simple things that Luke purports will stand against the rough beast of evil.

He calls this bearing fruit worthy of repentance....in other words do good, be compassionate, be just, be kind, be merciful...these are the fruits that are the outward and visible signs of repentance, again repentance meaning life-change....and life change is a conscious purposeful act, individually and collectively, and life change not only affects us but affects the world around us....in our world I think it means a life-change from self interest to common interest, think of the ramifications of such a choice, such a life-change...to live for the well being and dignity for the other as we would for ourselves...and this life change is not a one time thing, but a constant willful choosing of the good...that is why we need the church...a place wherein we remind each other, strengthen each other that we must continually be about lives of repentance, people of life-change, in the practice of choosing the greater good....One concrete example: After Nelson Mandela was released from 27 years of prison and became president of the new South Africa, post Apartheid South Africa....He could have seized dictatorial power and lorded it over the South African people, just as they had been used to... "Meet the new boss, the same as the old boss." But instead he oversaw the creation of a meaningful constitution lifting up civil rights...he insisted on amnesty for many who had oppressed the people of south Africa...recognizing that there is reconciliation and restoration found

in forgiveness...those were choices, conscious choices...life-change made by Mandela and his government, a society that called for a life change to love, dare I say...Let us hope the same choices are made in Egypt by the Morsi government, in Syria whenever the new regime comes to power...in all countries, including our own in which people live in indignity and in fear of the rough beast that stays on the prowl...let us choose love.

In Yeats' the Second Coming, the prophecy is dire...he only sees violence and anarchy...the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity, he writes...gloom and doom... 'tis a recurring season. But in our sacred lore, the gloom and doom has a formidable adversary...and that adversary is the fruits of life-change...acts of love in short: doing justice, and taking care of our neighbor and welcoming the unwelcomed...living with a predisposition of hospitality...this is our sure and certain hope, that our fruits of the faith, which indeed are acts of watchfulness and preparation for the commonweal to come, preparation for the way of Christ's egalitarian mutual commonweal...our sure and certain hope is that the rough beast of fear and violence is already being tamed and transformed into love...that is the alchemy of a God who only knows to give, only knows to love such that the whole of creation, its dark and its light will be restored into the wholeness, into the primordial mystery from whence it came...the mystery of love that began and will end all things.

Yeats saw a world dominated by the passionate intensity of violence...we dear brothers and sisters see a world dominated by the compassionate intensity of love... Spirit and Fire, Luke calls it...may that love, that Spirit and Fire be born and reborn in us as its very light, the light of Christ makes its dwelling in earth, up and against the cold and the dark, once and for all time....Let us choose...Let us choose the compassionate intensity of love...Be the Spirit, be the fire.