

Advent III Year C 2024

I've had something of a theological epiphany. For those of you who were here on All Saints Sunday; you will remember that the Rt. Rev. George Young, retired bishop of East Tennessee, stood in for bishop Russell, who had a conflicting engagement. Just two weeks before his visit here Bishop Young had shoulder replacement surgery. The logistics of getting oriented, not to mention getting vested for the service, were challenging, to say the least, given the fact that his right arm was strapped to his chest. His wife drove him here, and lugged all his bishop costume de riguer... Most bishops wear a pectoral cross, and somehow, in his compromised coming and going, he left his cross in the vesting room in the church. He called me Monday morning, the day after the service and asked that I return it to him the next time I was in Pensacola. No hurry, he said. "I don't have any commitments for the next several months." Last week, I decided I would hop over to Pensacola and return the cross, lest it slipped my mind. He said the cross was given him by his father, an Episcopal priest. I had not looked closely at the cross until I got ready to go. On the face of the cross was a human figure.... Not Jesus, as one would expect.... But Mary, the mother of Jesus... not crucified... but in a thoughtful pose, hands clasped, head slightly bowed.... And it struck me that perhaps this particular cross got the theology of the cross right.... That it represented grief... grief, not just for her son... but grief for all the victims of the world... grief for all the crucified at the hands of power. So behind the flimsy veneer of merrymaking this time of year, lies our grief... grief for lost loved ones, and other things lost; grief for the world's suffering;

grief for dashed hope... grief for the waning light. And it struck me that grief is Love's means of healing.

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 the writer of 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, that is, they must experience *a reordered awareness*, a return to reasonableness... my translation... a reordered awareness, in the face of their grief, so that they are able to recognize the powers of darkness that threaten the world's undoing... And after all, just to be clear.... That's what the Jesus movement is all about. It's not about being comfortable and happy... It's about calling out evil in our world and standing against it... as healers. As W.B. Yeats declared that the world is governed by a heartless passionate intensity, and God knows we see that today... we believe, as followers of Jesus, that the world is restored by the intensity of Love.

I've heard countless Advent sermons about waiting for our hope to take shape...waiting for God to act...sermons about how it is not in our modern mindset to wait; so let's just be patient... 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 certain hope and excited expectation, our grief notwithstanding....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, house to house; 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... In his gospel narrative, the people, beset with grief, pour out into the desert to ask this desert prophet named John, "What shall we ever do." It is a question for every age when it comes to the dark power that assaults our world, "what shall we ever do?" The people, in short, are desperate; that's why they are coming. But Luke tells us, audaciously, that it is a question we ask in the fervent hope that courage engenders...a great paradox to be sure...and that paradox lives on today. It is tempting to think that our age is the worst of times; but the truth is that throughout human history we have always had to contend with the calamitous forces of evil; with corrupted power and the havoc and shame and dispossession it brings.

We now live in a post capitalist society. The middle class is rapidly shrinking; the gap between rich and poor widens; the notion of getting ahead economically by good ole' hard work is being undermined by a rigged system that is tilted towards the powerful. Our very democracy is in crisis: The rule of law is being challenged; the separation of powers, a hallmark of our Constitution, is being compromised. The First Amendment gift of a free press is being subverted. The moral compass among the nations of the world seems to be spinning for lack of direction and leadership. On our borders would be immigrants seeking a better life languish still in the dispossession of homelessness. Our prison system, now a massive industry, imposes disproportionate incarceration upon

people of color with no hope of a productive and dignified life after a sentence is served. The probability of a two state solution between Israel and Palestine is all but lost. People wander the streets in every city in this country seeking shelter. I could go on of course... But let me say, again, these are not mere partisan political issues... these are gospel issues, and therefore our issues. And in our liturgical cycle in the church, at the beginning of the church year, here at the winter solstice, it is for us to ask, "What shall we ever do?" Not in desperation but in a sure and certain hope.

John the Baptizer in our passage for today, has an answer to that very question for the people. Luke has John speaking to the proverbial crowds; and like Matthew and Mark his preaching is directed toward the elite, the power structure: the scribes, and Pharisees, tax collectors, even Roman soldiers....and here in a literary twist Luke ceases using the spectacular 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 the clouds....instead he answers them in an improbable, mundane way....Up and against this cosmos shaking violence and evil, he tells them just three things....If you've got two coats, share one with someone who needs it; and share your food too....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 and despair.

He calls this bearing fruit worthy of repentance....in other words do good, be compassionate, be just, be kind, be merciful, be honest... be the people you are called to

be, healers of the world's grief...these are the fruits that are the outward and visible signs of repentance....and this awareness is a conscious purposeful act, individually and collectively, and this reordering not only affects us but affects the world around us....in our world today I think it means choosing common interest instead of self-interest: Small choice; huge difference....to live for the well-being and dignity of the other as we would for ourselves...and this reordered awareness is not a one time thing, but a constant willful choosing of the good; a practice...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 who value awareness, perspective, and the truth, and putting that into practice.

.... Perhaps the greatest mistake we make as modern Christians is that we expect God's appearing to be spectacular.... But God is not spectacular... God comes to us in the mundane, every-day...God shows up in our peripheral vision, on the margins. God comes to us in simple acts of Love, and Love, we claim, is so very strong... and love has the power to change things when let loose.... In this dark season, let us, brothers and sisters, choose love once again.

Good people, the world is forever falling apart. We are right to grieve its demise. But in our eyes of faith, the gloom and doom has a formidable adversary...and that adversary is Love:... doing justice, and taking care of our neighbor and welcoming the unwelcomed... .. John the Baptist is challenging us to be awake.” Our sure and certain hope is that the rough beast of fear and violence is already being vanquished. Undone by love that heals...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... that we live in the mystery that made and makes all things.

Prophets old and new see a world dominated by the passionate intensity of violence... We dear brothers and sisters see a world inspired 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 this day and every day so that we may live with integrity and joy up and against the cold and the dark.Let us take courage and choose....Let us choose the compassionate intensity of love... let us heed the prophet's words... And Be the Spirit... be the fire.