

Advent 3B (RCL)
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

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December 11, 2011

Please pray with me:

Please pray with me: May only God's word be spoken and only God's word heard. Amen.

Are you the Messiah? John the Baptist is clear about one thing: he is not the long-awaited Messiah. He is actually clear about a second thing: about the critical role he has to play in the coming of the messiah, in preparing his community to receive the one who was to come.

We hear about John the Baptist on two of the four Sundays in Advent: last week described in the Gospel of Matthew as one wearing a camel's hair tunic and leather belt, subsisting on locusts and wild honey; this week with no physical description, but with some dialogue about his identity and only a brief description of what he does—offering a baptism of forgiveness, and pointing to the one who is to come. He takes no credit for his own actions; instead he testifies to the light, the light who is coming into that world.

There's a little out-of-order chronology for John and us. We hear about John as we await the coming of the infant Christ; John speaks that Christ, his cousin, younger by only a few months, as an adult. The common thread between us and John is waiting, waiting expectantly for an extraordinary arrival. This is the challenge of Advent: we know who we're waiting for; we know how to mark this waiting time, with increasing lights of Advent candles; we know how we will celebrate—again—his coming; we know what will happen to him at the end of his earthly ministry. We have the promise each year of Jesus' coming, Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus' ascension. What we do not have on an annual basis is any date specificity of Jesus' coming again at the end time. For that we wait.

Lots of people are waiting for this. And they're waiting for the coming of God's kingdom, for the fulfillment of the promise that God does want them to have it better: to have enough food for their families, for the pain of day-to-day living to be eased, for safe shelter, for families separated by disagreements, old wounds, incarceration to be reunited.

This waiting goes way, way back in history. The prophet Isaiah spoke about this kind of restoration, about the coming of the kingdom: "I have been sent," he says, "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,... to comfort all who mourn;"

We don't know much about this particular prophecy. It's from what's called Third Isaiah, the last major part of the book of Isaiah, thought to be written by 520-515 BCE, but scholars have not identified a specific situation that the prophet might have been addressing. It is, I think, a prophecy that could apply to any number of situations, including our own. There are plenty of people in our country who are brokenhearted, who feel captive to factors wholly beyond their control, who've given up looking for work and are giving up on hope. And there are untold millions around the world whose burdens are heavier than we can imagine. Indeed, there seem always to be people who are hurting, people who are awaiting, waiting expectantly the coming of God's kingdom.

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The passage we heard from Isaiah may seem familiar to you, and it's not because Handel included it in that wonderful oratorio we hear (and sing) this time of the year. You may recognize these words as words that Jesus spoke, preached actually, when he returned to his hometown synagogue. Jesus picked up the opening words of our reading and proclaimed it as his mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" (Luke 4:18-21)

Like Isaiah, Jesus was not talking about individual salvation, but about systemic, holistic transformation of a culture, of the world. Jesus proclaimed that this prophecy was fulfilled. And yet, we know of many, many people who have not experienced that fulfillment, who continue to wait expectantly for the coming of God's kingdom. That is a challenge far more difficult than our four-week Advent challenge, when we may want to linger in the expectancy of Advent while our culture trumpets the Christmas celebration that we continue to await. For many in our world, the challenge of waiting for the coming of the kingdom extends throughout their earthly lives.

And yet....

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Let's look again at the beginning of the Isaiah passage. The first phrase is important: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me." In the Hebrew, the word "spirit" is "*ruach*." This is the same spirit as the one that breathed over the waters in creation. This is the spirit that continues to blow around and through us. Jesus, taking these same words from Isaiah, claims this Spirit-identity for himself.

Walter Brueggemann described this *ruach*, this spirit, as "[the] unutterable, irresistible, undomesticated force that surges into history to liberate, heal, remake, and transform... the strange, invasive mystery of God that keeps the world loose, at least around the edges." (*Using God's Resources Wisely: Isaiah and Urban Possibility*, [Westminster John Knox Press, 1993], pp. 19-20.) The uncontrollable *ruach* of God was upon the prophet Isaiah and upon Jesus to utterly transform the world. John the Baptist—we don't want to lose track of him this morning—was not called in the same way, but was called to prepare the way, to make the path straight. Then that *ruach*, that Spirit broke through and descended upon Jesus when John baptized him.

And that Spirit, that *ruach*, is upon us who have been baptized. Just as Jesus took on the prophecy of Isaiah, so we, who in the words of our Prayer Book "are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism" must take it on. That is our calling as followers of Jesus, to participate in the radical transformation of our world. Because God, as Isaiah reminded us, loves justice, a broader concept than most of us can grasp, especially on a day-to-day basis. Yet we are called to help transform the world each and every day. We may think our ability is limited; the kind of change we can effect is small. That may be true. And that doesn't matter. What does matter is our willingness, our openness to cooperate with the Spirit, the *ruach* with which we were anointed in baptism. As Paul reminded the church at Thessalonica, "do not quench the Spirit."

We can also learn from John the Baptist as we live into this Spirit-cooperation. As one scholar noted, this account of John the Baptist reminds "contemporary prophets who understand their justice work to be inspired by God ... that they are not the point in and of themselves; their work, like that of John, is to point to the work of God." (Monica Coleman, in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year B*, [Westminster John Knox Press, 2011] pp.24-5) That we are not the point in and of ourselves as we cooperate in transforming the world is, for me at least, reassuring. We are to do what we can in the name of Christ: bringing good news to the poor, the captive, the oppressed.

And by doing whatever we can, we help to bring about God's kingdom, even if through us only a single person gets just a teensy glimpse of it. Doing whatever we can is living out our baptismal promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons; it's making incarnate the Spirit, the *ruach*, with which we are anointed, the same spirit that ordered the chaos of creation. Our part in that creation may seem insignificant; our part in the transformation of that creation, the making of a new creation, smaller still. But that's not the point. Even the light of the smallest candle can pierce the darkness. And even a tiny baby could change the world.

Amen.