

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**December 7, 2008**

Advent 2B 2008

In the Name of our One, Holy, ever mysterious God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

At our quiet Advent prayer service this past Friday at dusk, Mary Anna Waldrop remarked that Advent is by far her favorite season. She said that for her, it is what makes Christmas real. I share that feeling. Maybe it is because I lived in New England, but Advent with its peculiar readings from Scripture combined with the deepening dark days and increasingly cold weather always seemed to lead me to wonder about the future and where I should look for security and promise. Winters are long in New England, so I had lots of time to wonder.

The readings for today continue the Advent theme of portents and promises. The readings from the Hebrew Scripture come from Isaiah. They deal both with the realities of violence and injustice and with the hope that God is still there for us. Israel had lost its way and abandoned its covenant with the Lord. Justice was perverted to favor and protect the powerful. The poor were oppressed by usurious interest rates and their lands taken from them. The leaders placed their trust in their own values and their own military power rather than God's loving protection. The biblical ethics of justice and kindness had been abandoned, the nation fell to the conquering Assyrians and its people were taken captive. In today's lesson, the Prophet declares God's judgment that the time of punishment is over. God will again lead them back into their land where

God will care for them as a shepherd cares for his flock. All that was needed was the vision of the sheep to hope and their decision to follow their shepherd.

Today's Gospel lesson is the opening of Mark's Gospel. Times were again tough and scarcity, injustice and violence were the order of the day. For hundreds of years the nation had been under foreign domination. Now it was Rome that ruled harshly via a puppet king and a corrupted Temple leadership. The heavens seemed shut tight and God had not spoken for a long time. In today's lesson introducing the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God, Mark introduces us to John the Baptist. Dressed like Elijah of old and using the words of the ancient prophets, John promised that God was about to do something huge, something unimaginable.

Proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, John promise the coming of another who would give the world the very presence of God – baptizing God's people with the Holy Spirit. Repentance in the biblical sense is not beating up on one's self but a change of heart, a change of values. It is a turning away from false values and a turning towards the ethics of the Covenant – the ethics of justice and kindness. It is a turning away from the false self and a turning towards the true self that exists in relation with the Creator.

Portents and promises. They are still with us. Our economy is in a tailspin not seen for several generations. People are cut off from their jobs, their assets and their plans for the future. Violence is not only world wide, but appears more chaotic and nonsensical than ever before. Where do we find our security? But this is not new. Remember the situation 67 years ago on December 7, 1941! The country was in the midst of a world-wide economic depression and out of the blue Japanese Zeros flew of these Islands and bombed our people.

The portents are there alright. But can we see the promise? My friend Mark Beckwith, now the Bishop of Newark, wrote about a sermon he heard during the civil rights period by the Rev. Gardner Taylor, a Baptist minister who could preach like a Baptist! Pastor Taylor told of his days being the “warm-up preacher” for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Those, too, were tough times full of injustice, civil oppression and violence. One evening in the deep South he preached in a church that was packed the night before a non-violent civil rights march. The local people were looking for hope and inspiration to prepare them for the courageous – and dangerous – witness they were going to make the next day to their ethics of justice and kindness.

In the middle of his sermon the lights went out. People braced themselves for vigilantes to break in or fire bombs to be thrown through the windows – it had happened before. Suddenly, the clear calm voice of an older woman rang out, “Preach on, Preacher Man,” she said, “we can still see Jesus in the dark!”

That woman had done her work. Her whole life may have been one long Advent season of sitting in the dark world of violence and injustice. She kept awake; she kept alert. She was aware of the reality of her world, but she learned a lot about God. She knew that none of the injustice and pain were God’s doing; she knew that God wanted none of this. Through it all she saw the promise. Like John the Baptist she could see the light of Christ.

Advent is what makes us see the meaning of Christmas – the promise of Christmas that does not end on December 25<sup>th</sup>. The “being aware”, the “being awake” of Advent’s call to reflection and repentance are based on God’s invitation and initiative and our ability and choice to follow God’s call. We are not just passive observers. That woman in that Southern Church saw enough light to know that God

was calling her to make a better world, just as the people of this country saw hope and determination rather than despair on December 8, 1941! As John the Baptist proclaims “A voice calls out: ‘in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’” Let us pray that this year during Advent each of us can look through the darkness and see the light of Christ and respond with acts of justice, kindness and hospitality.

Amen.