

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**Sunday December 6, 2009**

Advent 2 C 2009

In the name of ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Maybe it is because Thanksgiving is just over, but lately I have been thinking about the people who sat at Thanksgiving dinners when I was a young person and remembering the stories they used to tell. The stories centered on family and friends and how things used to be. Interestingly, very few of the stories centered on great successes or wonderful trips or the things people had. Usually they centered on the importance of right relationships and the value of family and friends. Often they were not about when times were good, but rather when times were difficult and challenging: stories about the Depression and how we got through that about who helped whom; stories about WWII and how the country pulled together; stories about when crisis faced the family or the community. Here in the Islands, we often hear the kapuna talk about the plantation days, when everyone worked hard and no one had much of anything, yet how much aloha and community there was. Some, perhaps much, of that is nostalgia, but I think what was missed was old values that seem to be lost or at least buried by our current culture.

Our readings today are somewhat in that vein. The Book of Baruch is set in the days when the Judeans were held in captivity in Babylonia and is named for Jeremiah's secretary, Baruch. However, it was actually written about 100 or so years before Jesus' birth. The author is living in a society where things were going off the tracks. There was no justice – the Temple and the Court were corrupted. The law was being used to dispossess the poor farmers and the poor got even poorer and more numerous as the elite got richer. There was no peace and violence was everywhere.

The author is taking his readers back to another time when things were bad and when God

had made a promise of deliverance and then acted to make it happen. He reminds them of a time when everyone had little but together created a glorious city -Jerusalem. Returning through the desert from Babylon, they created a city of righteous peace and Godly glory that beckoned the world - city that was built on the repentance that was learned in captivity and in the desert.

Our Gospel lesson from the first chapter of Luke strikes a similar note. Luke places his narrative in time and place as a Greek writer would do – by identifying the great rulers and religious authorities of the time. He then makes a bold announcement: the word of God was again heard in the world! The heavens had been shut up for a long time. Israel hadn't heard from a prophet for centuries. Now one comes to proclaim God is going to again fulfill God's promise.

Notice that this great news came not to the great rulers and priests just named as they sat in their palaces. No, it came to this man John, son of Zechariah, who preached out in the wilderness along the banks of the Jordan River. That very setting would ring bells in Jewish ears. Yes, God acted before when God led us through the wilderness to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. Yes, God had acted in the wilderness when we were freed from the Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. Now, again we are called to meet God in the desert.

John preached two things: 1. Preparation – “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” quoting words of Isaiah announcing their release from slavery and 2. A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Preparation often gets short shrift in our busy lives. But we are called to it this Advent season. What work do we have to do in our lives to be ready to receive the Good News of Christmas Day?

John tells us to take a good hard look at ourselves and our world. The time has come to make some changes – of our hearts and minds. I don't know about you, but when company is coming we look at our home and examine our surroundings with a whole new perspective and much more attentive and critical eyes. The good part of that is that we see what could be – something nicer, cleaner and more enjoyable. The hard part is that we know it will make us do a lot of work.

If we are called to do that when company visits, what are we called to do when God is going to

drop into our lives? That is John's message of preparation. Of course, this message is heard only when we can look clearly and see that things could be different, that things could be better in our lives and in our world. Get ready, John tells us, because things will never be the same again. Repentance and sin are not popular terms today. You rarely hear them even in church. When I do hear them I am often put off because it is usually in the context of someone else's sins and need for repentance rather than one's own. Many are also put off by those terms because they are usually in the context of other people's intimate personal lives and rarely if ever used in the context of the injustices found in our common community life and the pain those injustices cause. But that is not what John was talking about. He wasn't about beating up on other people or ourselves. Repentance in his language meant a turning, a change of mind and heart. It was about turning away from what blinds us or distracts us from God and turning one's heart and mind toward God's ethics of justice and peace.

John is also saying something new. Before, forgiveness of sins was only done through sacrifice at the Temple. Now, John is saying that God's forgiveness is available everywhere even in, or maybe especially in, the wilderness of our lives. It is available not only to those who could enter the Temple, but is available to all. But here's the tricky part: This kind of forgiveness is relational. We have to ask for it and be willing to receive it. In some ways, I think it may be easier to forgive than to be forgiven. To accept forgiveness is to accept that we have erred and have hurt or disappointed another. If we are willing to assume that responsibility there comes along with it the responsibility to change our way of being or behaving.

In this Advent season, we are called out into the wilderness. It may not be comfortable. It may even be scary. But we do so certain that we will be led back to fuller and better lives by God. Amen.