

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, and let the power of your Spirit enter in. Amen.

This is the third Sunday of Advent. These four Sundays of Advent seem to go by so quickly. I think maybe because we all have our eyes on the prize of Christmas Day and there is so much to do to get ready for that. Shopping for gifts and then wrapping them, maybe mailing them, planning holiday meals, sending out Christmas cards and, lest I forget, decorating our houses... and our churches. Thanks to our Altar Guild it looks lovely here inside and outside our church. And Seung-Hye, our organist and music director, has planned for wonderful music and had rehearsals to prepare the choir and the handbell choir, especially for Christmas Eve. Then there are the holiday parties and musical performances to attend. With all the busy-ness, it is good to take a moment each week and recognize the reason for this season with prayer and worship and fellowship.

Sometimes we find we need someone just to blow a whistle and call a timeout so we might give ourselves the time to appreciate the moment. We all just need to take a breath and realize that all of this activity is because God came into our world to dwell among us in order to save us from ourselves. Before anyone could ever appreciate that, it became clear that people needed to prepare. John, the son of Zechariah, was out in the desert in the first century blowing that proverbial whistle. He was “crying out in the wilderness” to anyone who would listen that the time had come for people to have a change of mind, a change of heart and to refocus their lives. To put in today’s terms, John the Baptizer was kind of like a homeless man standing in Central Park crying out to the people in suits on Wall Street, to the people in the cities so caught up in

accumulating wealth and power they could no longer see the needs of other people in their world. John wanted them to know that there was another way. John wanted to help them prepare to reorient their lives by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. That process would begin with baptism. Baptism by John signaled a cultural and theological paradigm shift in that first century.

It seems to me that we are experiencing a cultural and theological paradigm shift today. There have been many paradigm shifts throughout human history and they usually are recognized by the key people who ushered them in. For example, Martin Luther ushered in a major theological shift ushering in the Protestant Reformation. It did not lead away from God and Christ but to a new and more accessible way for people to understand and worship them. Martin Luther King, Jr. ushered in a cultural shift when he led American society into a new and more just way to live in a multi-racial world. Today we are experiencing a theological and cultural shift. Theologically we are in the midst of an era of church decline, or I might even call it church transformation. The church is not going away but it is working through understanding itself differently as the body of Christ and not as an institution of cathedrals, church buildings and dogma. The western world, in fact the whole world to some degree or another, is experiencing the chaotic impact of an exponentially influential age of information and technology. Pivotal characters are out there, but it is not yet clear who will emerge as having played a role that leads us into the future that is unfolding. Elon Musk, who is in the headlines a lot these days, might be a candidate. But there are others.

In today's gospel reading, people were streaming out into the desert curious to have an encounter with John. They had heard his cry for them all to repent and be baptized. They may have thought that the baptism would be a once and done kind of thing. They'd get dunked in the river and then head on back to the city, cleansed of their sins. Like the escaped prisoner in the movie, 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?,' who said after being baptized in a river, "My sins done been washed away!" As if there were now no need for any change on his part, that work had been done *for* him.

But John told them they needed to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Whatever could that mean? His answer was different for different people. In other words, the answer is unique to each person, unique to each life and lifestyle. John's call for repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia* which means 'a change of mind.' Not a change of mind such as deciding not to go to a movie, or deciding to turn left instead of right. This kind of change of mind involves the whole self. It is a reorienting of a life focus. The baptism is the moment when that reorientation begins. The reorientation is not complete when a person comes out of the water, it has only just begun.

Last week in our gospel text, we heard the prophecy from Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.'" I don't think that Isaiah was talking about the topography of Israel. I think the mountains and valleys, crooked and rough ways are metaphors for those places inside spiritual selves that present obstacles to a faithful relationship with God. Our tendency to always want

more is a mountain, our feelings of anger and unforgiveness are valleys. Our human tendency to put faith and trust in idols are crooked paths. Lack of care for all other people are rough places. Now is our chance for reorienting ourselves, for remembering and rediscovering the orientation that began at our baptisms. And if any of us have not been baptized, now might just be the time.

John the Baptist was the harbinger of the most radical paradigm shift the world has ever known. God sent His Son into the world to save humanity. We are expecting to celebrate Jesus' arrival in just ten days. The celebration will be ever so much sweeter if we prepare ourselves to welcome him in. While we immerse ourselves in the sounds and the demands of the season, I hope you all will pause for a moment every now and then to reflect on the awesome, unparalleled gift that God has given us in Jesus. Jesus is the gift that truly never stops giving.

I want to close with the lyrics from a familiar Advent hymn:

Come, Thou long expected Jesus  
Born to set Thy people free;  
From our fears and sins release us,  
Let us find our rest in Thee.

Amen.