

ADVENT 2 – DECEMBER 6, 2009  
THE REV. DANIEL T. AVERY

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'..."

We all know that the original manuscripts of the gospels were written in the Greek language. I believe every Christian should know a little Greek. How many of you know the English word that we use to translate the Greek word  $\epsilon\lambda\theta\epsilon\tau\epsilon\ \mu\epsilon$  (agáp )? (Talk to me!) That's right, we translate it "love." How about the Greek word  $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\mu\epsilon$  (ér s)? It too is translated into English as "love." In fact, C. S. Lewis has taught us that there are four Greek words that we translate into the same English word "love." In addition to agáp and ér s, the Greek words  $\phi\iota\lambda\iota\alpha$  (philia) and  $\sigma\tau\omicron\rho\gamma\eta$  (storg ) are given the English word "love." Each word names something different in Greek--  $\epsilon\lambda\theta\epsilon\tau\epsilon\ \mu\epsilon$  (agáp ) "is the love that brings forth caring regardless of circumstance;"  $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota\mu\epsilon$  (ér s) is love in the sense of 'being in love'.  $\phi\iota\lambda\iota\alpha$  (philia) "is a strong bond existing between people who share a common interest or activity," and  $\sigma\tau\omicron\rho\gamma\eta$  (storg ) "is fondness through familiarity, especially between family members." All four loves are named in our language with the one English word "love."

Continuing our Greek lesson, how about the Greek word  $\logos$  (logos)? What's our English word for logos? That's right, we translate it "word" as in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God, and the logos was God...and (continuing in verse 14) the logos became flesh and lived among us..."

I see we have some budding Greek scholars here, so let's try another. It's in our gospel lesson this morning where Luke tells us that "(John) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of... in the Greek the word is,  $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\lambda\omicron\gamma\iota\sigma\mu\omicron\varsigma$  (metanoia). John proclaimed a baptism of metanoia. What English word do we use to translate metanoia? Metanoia is translated into English as "repentance." What you may not know is that this is an awful translation of the word metanoia. There is no English word for metanoia. If there were one I guess it would be...well, I don't really know what it would be, but it wouldn't be "repentance." I don't know about you but I have always thought repentance meant being sorry for getting caught at something. Metanoia has no sense of being sorry or remorseful in it. There simply is no word in the English language that captures the meaning of metanoia.

Some of our early church Fathers knew this. In the early third century Tertullian, reminded his church members that, "In Greek, the root meaning of "metanoia" is not the "confession of a sin"—but a "change of mind."<sup>1</sup> Expositors in our time often say that metanoia is a turning, a turning around, changing directions. Both change of mind and change of direction capture some sense of this word but let's see if we can define it a little more.

We do have a similar word in English that we are familiar with. It's the word metamorphosis— $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$  (meta) meaning "change" and  $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\omicron\varsigma$  (morphe) meaning "form." To metamorphose is to change the entire form of something. The butterfly knows a lot about this. A butterfly begins its life as an egg. The little caterpillar hatches from the egg. After it eats the leaf it hatched on, the caterpillar searches for food. When it's ready, the caterpillar finds a special place, sheds its skin and attaches itself to a leaf with a sticky substance that hardens into a cocoon-like chrysalis. Inside, the amazing miracle of the changes of Spring takes place and, in time, a fully formed butterfly begins to break out. The transformation is soon complete and the butterfly is free. That's metamorphosis of the

<sup>1</sup> "Repentance" in Bercot, David W. (ed.). A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998, p. 557.

body. Metanoia is a metamorphosis, not of a body, but of the mind. The caterpillar undergoes an extreme makeover to become a butterfly! Those who would be followers of Jesus must undergo an extreme makeover of the mind.

Metanoia is a revolution of the mind and spirit. It's the transformation of the one's way of thinking. It's the kind of change that takes place when the light of God shines on a person and our whole world is seen from a different perspective. There is no sorry or remorse in metanoia. It a time for joy! It's a joyful revolution of the mind that prepares us for the way of the new order of God that Jesus brings.

Now, most of us have very little experience with changing our minds! We like being caterpillars. We enjoy our way of life. Our way of thinking justifies and rationalizes staying a caterpillar. How often do we hear the flutter of butterflies in the church? It's that flutter that keeps the fellowship holy! Many of us are simply afraid of the fragility and risk of being a butterfly and prefer the stage of the caterpillar.

John understood that metanoia was essential in the new order of God that Jesus would usher in. He also knew that the revolutionary ideas of Jesus can not be comprehended in the current order of things.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Luke goes to great lengths to be sure we know that John is not a part of the political and religious establishments that dominate. Luke does list the political and religious power brokers of the time, six names that are strange to our tongues, three of whom Luke never speaks of again, all of whom, Luke tells us, were bypassed by the Word of God, in favor of John in the wilderness. The places and privileges of power do not prepare us for participating in the life of God. The wilderness might.

John knew that if you want to introduce a revolutionary way, you don't go to the power establishments that dominate culture. It's in the wilderness where minds are fertile for the revolution of love.

In Luke's gospel, if you want to hear the word of God you don't seek the audience of the powerful; you find your way to the wilderness where you can experience metanoia. For the Word of God, you see, has no room in the opulence of power. The powers-that-be seek to preserve their own welfare, not to will the welfare of others.

I end this morning with a paraphrase of our Collect of the Day: Merciful God, who sent your messengers to tell us that the Spring light and mysteries of God will change us from caterpillars to butterflies and set us free: Give us grace to greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Sunday, December 6, 2009  
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