

St. John's Hampton, VA
December 5th, 2019
3rd Advent (A)
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:4-9
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Last night my wife Carolyn and I continued our seasonal tradition of seeing the Virginia Stage Company's production of Charles Dickens' story, "A Christmas Carol." Always for me the standout characters are the shadowy representations of the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. Each year the stage production seems to do better and better presenting these haunting figures.

I've always wondered where Dickens got his model for these characters, particularly the ghost of Christmas future. If he used the likewise shadowy and haunting figure of John the Baptist I would not be the least bit surprised.

Like a mythical being from beyond our time/space continuum John wants to bring our attention to the long awaited savior of the world. Specifically, in a voice from almost 21 centuries ago, John bids us to look for the coming of Jesus.//

Though I to spend a great deal if in airplanes, I'm not a pilot. I am always in the back of the plane. However, because I do fly in a lot of commercial aircraft I am always interested in what makes pilots tick and why they do what they do. With an ongoing concern for safety, I'm interested in what their liabilities are. Just recently I was talking with a friend of mine who is a pilot. I asked him what the greatest liability to a pilot is. He said, "Oh, that's easy. It is spatial awareness - the ability to know where you are, what is ahead, above, beneath, beside and behind you." He went on to say that the lack of spatial awareness is absolutely deadly. Often this is said in another way: "Have faith in your instruments."

As I listen to John the Baptist draw our attention to the coming savior, in effect he is a spiritual instrument who to us is saying that we need spiritual awareness. He is posing the question – a question for all to hear – about whether Jesus is the one who will come and save us. If he is, just "if," then perhaps we need to get our lives ready for him.

In 1963 a Chicago R&B musician/songwriter by the name of Curtis Mayfield was in Washington, DC for the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's "March on Washington." When Curtis heard Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech, he knew he had to respond. Aware that that his God-given talent was music, he knew that the best way to respond was through that medium. It took him a couple of years, but in 1965 Curtis Mayfield & the Impressions released the song: "People get ready."

“People get ready, there's a train a-comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.”

Having grown up as an incorrigible R&B fan and collector, as soon as I heard that song I loved it. Yet, to be honest with you, though the rhythm was captivating and the lyrics were mystifying, I had not a clue as to what Curtis Mayfield was trying to tell me. For one thing, in 1965 I had never set foot on a passenger train. Many years later when trains had become a staple of my everyday life, I had an experience in which I learned about Curtis Mayfield's message. A few years ago I was standing on a train platform with a hundred or so passengers waiting on the daily train that would take us to our offices and other places of work. We were waiting for the same train that I had been riding for almost a year. Without ever talking with another soul about this, I knew that as a veteran train passenger I developed some rider habits. I had learned that before I ever saw the approaching train I would know it was coming because of two things: first I would feel the vibration that came from the train rails up onto the platform. Next I would hear the diesel engine humming. THEN I would see the train. Those were the signs that I needed to get ready to board the train. On that train platform over 40 years later, finally it dawned upon me what Curtis Mayfield wanted his hearers and fans to know. For him, in 1965, the important message was for people to believe that the diesels were humming, and a change was going to come; that the people of this country, particularly black men and women, were soon to see a monumental set of changes in how they were treated and regarded. Mayfield had retold Dr. King's message.

For me, ever since that day, "People get ready" has been a lyrical and musical symbol of John the Baptist's encouragement for the people of his day to get ready for the coming of the savior, the Lord Jesus. If truly Jesus is the one for whom his people have been looking for hundreds of years, people need to change their directions and let the newness of Christ Jesus wash over them as would an ocean wave wash over the seashore. John the Baptist wanted to touch into the lives of his people to encourage them to look beyond who they were to what they could become. The coming savior of the world could and would change them in ways they never imagined.

From a desolate prison John called out asking: “Jesus are you the one to come; the one for whom we've been waiting all these years?” Jesus' response to him was to quote from the passage just read from Isaiah: Am I making the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers be cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead raised, and am I giving good news to the poor? If the answer is “yes,” then I am the one for whom you have been looking.

Today John's announcement challenges us to tarry for a time to wait on the Savior. During Advent, the challenge is, in the words of the letter of James in the New Testament, to be patient and wait upon the Lord to come. As a farmer plants a crop and waits for the rain and sun to make the crop grow, the farmer patiently waits for the time of the harvest of the crop. Like that crop, Jesus is very near. Though in our

season of Advent we paradoxically wait for Jesus who has already come, we are taking these four weeks to prepare our hearts and minds for the Christmas event that is still 10 days away.

Very shortly I am going to gather around the baptismal font with those people who will step forward to confirm their baptismal vows and people who ask to be received into this branch of Christ's church. Simultaneously all of us will publicly reaffirm our Christian faith through the renewal of our baptism vows. If you are going to be confirmed, received or reaffirm your Christian faith, as you are able, please stand. //

By virtue of the fact that you all chose to stand, you are telling us that you intend to be disciples or followers of Christ. You are about to make your faith declaration in this public public worship event. In other words, you are saying that you are a disciple of Christ. As we learned from hearing how John pointed people toward Jesus, being a follower calls us to leave the safety zones that we have established for ourselves and step out into a potentially risky zone of life. Discipleship always has and always will involve some risks.

Knowing that there are some risks, how ready are you to go through with this, this Jesus thing? Are you willing to go all-in proclaiming your belief in and fidelity to Jesus as the one for whom people were looking two thousand years ago? By virtue of your commitment you will be proclaiming that Jesus is the one for whom we've been wanting; that we don't need to wait for another one.

Soon through the renewal of your baptismal vows publicly you will affirm that Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life. You will be asked to affirm that you will love the people of God's creation; that you will respect and guard those who at times may be hard to love. Some may consider them to be unlovable. You are going asked to affirm that you are willing to be an ambassador of the Jesus-love that you have received. In our culture, our society, you can be sure that that is a risk.

I have a bit of advice for you, not only to make such as loving the unloved of our society easier, but to make it possible. Always stay tied to your Christian community. Really there is only one good reason for not having the confirmation or renewal of your baptismal vows at 3 o'clock on Saturday afternoon in a relatively private and family-only service. To do this service on Sunday morning at St. John's consolidated worship service you are making public affirmations of your faith – in the midst of your supportive Christian community.

Hearing the cry of John the Baptist about Jesus, I challenge you to pay attention to your spiritual awareness of Jesus Christ's place in your lives. The Jesus Christ whom you will affirm this morning will sustain you in the best of times and in the worst of times. The Jesus Christ whom you affirm will keep you centered during your most profound moments of joy, and give you strength and clarity during the times of your most challenging life experiences. The Jesus Christ whom you affirm will be the sustaining peace of God in Christ that surpasses all human understanding. AMEN.