

December 16, 2018

Third Sunday in Advent

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**Isaiah: 12: 2-6**

**Luke: 3:7-18**

**Worthy of Repentance:  
Disrupting Darkness**

The 8:00 service bulletin offers an opening sentence each week...a sentence that kind of guides the tenor of the worship hour. Today those verses come from the gospel of John: "What has come into

*being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."* (John 1: 4-5) Darkness here is understood to be the antithesis of light and life and God's intention for all people to live in such light. The introduction of light in the beginning, in Genesis, in the Creation, is called "good."

Let me say first that I personally don't have a lot of issues with actual darkness...especially nighttime...for there are things that one cannot see except at night, when it is dark...things that fade by light of day like stars, and moonflowers, and the moon itself. It is also true that, when darkness is used as a metaphor, many of us will say that it is often in our darkest times in life that we draw closest to God, which is certainly a good thing.

In the above text however, John refers to darkness mostly as metaphor, suggesting that it represents malevolence, and perhaps even evil itself; and that those things need to be overcome. Darkness is understood by John to be opposite God, life, light and good. Overwhelming Darkness by disrupting it with light was Jesus' purpose as Jesus was God's light that came into the world to save it/to save us, so that we may say with confidence that death does not have the final word over life, among other things. That light and life came into the world through Jesus Christ and, while darkness still exists, it is not victorious.

It is clearer in Luke's gospel. The answer to the darkness is producing fruit that is worthy of repentance...right actions and good works that will disrupt the darkness. Repentance, metanoia, means changing that which has been one's custom or behavior. It involves recognizing wrongdoing and bad living. "Worthy of repentance" is an odd phrase but a critical one, because repentance is more than just being sorrowful and confessing and asking forgiveness. True repentance means that you put the confession into action and put your money where your mouth



Harold Shaw

*God did not wait till the world was ready,  
Till...nations were at peace.  
God came when the Heavens were unsteady,  
And prisoners cried out for release.  
God did not wait for the perfect time,  
God came when the need was deep and great.  
God dined with sinners in all their grime,  
Turned water into wine. God did not wait  
Till hearts were pure. In joy God came  
To a tarnished world of sin and doubt.  
To a world like ours, of anguished shame  
God came, and God's Light would not go out.  
God came to a world which did not mesh,  
To heal its tangles, shield its scorn.  
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh  
The Maker of the stars was born.  
We cannot wait till the world is sane  
To raise our songs with joyful voice,  
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

Madeleine L'Engle

is, we might say. John even gives examples of fruits of repentance: if you have two coats and someone has none, give them one; don't take more than you are entitled to, and don't bully others by your position of power...whether you be a tax collector or a soldier. Be fair, just, principled and honest. Don't bully others. The things you do should match the quality of your repentance. Only in that way are you worthy of that repentance you have professed and claimed.

A man was praying with his pastor in the sanctuary. He was struggling and confused and unclear about what was happening in his life, and so had done several things that were wrong and hurtful to others as he sought to cope with the uncertainty and foginess in his mind. He prayed a prayer the pastor had heard many times before. "Lord, take the cobwebs out of my life," he concluded. Just as he said this, the pastor interrupted and prayed, "Kill the spider, Lord."

Many times we ask the Lord to forgive us of some sin, yet we leave the source of temptation and darkness in our life. We are not going to be worthy of that repentance we have proclaimed until we deal with the darkness.

The Luke lectionary text for this Third Sunday in Advent is filled with anxiety from the crowd about what to do regarding this metaphorical darkness that threatens and surrounds them. John the Baptist's message to them had been, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" (Matthew 3:2). Surprisingly, this call to change had become popular, and people from Jerusalem and all Judea came to be baptized by him to save themselves. It was a scary message, and they were afraid.

But when some hypocritical religious leaders came to be baptized, John sensed they weren't interested in really repenting—really changing. He told them that just being a descendant of Abraham wasn't enough. They would be judged by their own actions. They needed actions to produce fruits to prove they really were sorry and desired to change.

Some of these fruits are described in Luke 3:10-14. They include giving to those in need, not cheating or intimidating people and being content. Those doing wrong should stop doing wrong to show they are serious about changing. Otherwise they risk the wrath of God and eternal punishment...the worst kind of darkness. Good works result only from sincere repentance.

John the Baptist is so serious about this that he calls them a brood of vipers and angrily says to them, "*Who told you to run away from it?*" Who told you that avoidance and denial of darkness...denial of things like injustice, wrongdoing, hatred, violence...all those aspects of darkness...was the way to respond? Avoidance is just an effort to save yourself and has no regard for anyone else. According to John, the only effective, not to mention responsible, way to react to the darkness around us is to face it head on and admit to our own sin which feeds it, and to stop the things that encourage its growth. Repentance is important but does not stop with being sorry. One must act and behave in ways that interrupt the cycle of darkness. This means that, in John's words, we must "bear fruits worthy of repentance." Especially true when we are in part or in whole responsible for that darkness.

Let's take a look at that term "brood of vipers" for a second. Awesome and effective isn't it? It's more powerful than some of the things I hear people screaming out their windows at each other on Ritchie Hwy during rush hour traffic! Vipers, of course, are venomous snakes that,

along with other creatures like spiders or wasps, terrify some of us...the fear being that we will be hurt or possibly killed by them. The Bible Study group this week suggested that snakes seek darkness as a way of staying hidden from the light. It is a good point. And John's use of the accusation suggests that those to whom he speaks/those seeking a baptism and ostensibly "quick fix" to their sinfulness, are like vipers...running away from impending judgement and the wrath of God for their wrongdoing...that they are seeking darkness with no sense of accountability for their wrongdoing, maybe not even awareness of it, and that they are relying upon their relationship to Abraham rather than the light that has come into the world through Jesus. They have no intention of repenting in order to change, and, therefore, are not worthy of bearing the fruits of that repentance.

I kind of feel sorry for that brood of vipers and their lack of understanding in that they are really anxious...fearful and afraid...because of what they anticipate may be the end of them if they don't figure out how to save themselves. "The wrath of God" is certainly something to contend with and take seriously. And anxiety is a real thing. Those of you who are anxious to the point of panic attacks know that. And those of you who just worry about things present and things to come know it as well. Research tells us, and clinical psychology has proven, that running away and or avoiding that which makes us anxious...denying our fears by running away or fleeing from wrath as John puts it, just teaches us to run away from anything that challenges us, with the result being that you may never even leave your house. We become agoraphobic...and unable, eventually, to go anywhere or do anything.

It is out of this confusion and fear-filled anxiety that the people (Pharisees included) are seeking baptism without understanding that repentance and "salvation" have more to it than just ritual...more to it even than just confession and forgiveness...more to it than John the Baptist alone can offer. What does this then look like? How do we produce fruits worthy of repentance?

Recently several harassed, imprisoned or slain journalists targeted for their work were named Time's 2018 "Person of the Year," which was revealed exclusively Tuesday morning on NBC's "Today." The magazine is calling the journalists "The Guardians." They are: Jamal Khashoggi, the murdered Washington Post columnist who penned critical columns about the Saudi crown prince; the staff of Maryland's Capital Gazette, five were killed in a mass shooting...and others...Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who were sentenced to prison for reporting in Myanmar; and Maria Ressa, the CEO of a news outlet in the Philippines targeted by President Rodrigo Duterte.

The term "The Guardians" implies that these are ones who placed themselves in harm's way for the sake of the light of truth...willing to interrupt darkness, which if left undisrupted would potentially allow those characteristics of darkness we named earlier to go unnamed, unimpeded and to flourish.

Those are powerful interruptions into darkness. Our own stories don't have to be that life-changing in the moment, but they must be there. I had several options but decided to share a personal one...a grocery incident. I was shopping one afternoon when I heard a commotion in the next aisle. A mother was repeatedly spanking her child. Several people approached her without any success in calming her down and getting her to stop. Someone called 911, while I

decided to try to diffuse the situation. As I neared the woman, she began yelling at me. I said, “No, no...I’m not trying to get you to stop. I want to thank you.” The confused woman stopped yelling at me long enough for me to say, “I’m a therapist, and because of this situation, your son will be one of my patients one day, keeping me in business!” The police arrived a short time later and took over.

In light of this Advent season, we should realize that you and I have opportunities each day to disrupt darkness. Remember that repentance is not just about being sorry for the contributions we’ve made to darkness, not even just stopping our attitudes and behaviors that contribute to it, but interrupting the cycles that perpetuate it. In so doing we bear the fruit that is worthy of that repentance we have named for ourselves. It means that we disrupt situations and speak out against hatred, bigotry, racism and violence. Sometimes it will be a simple refusal to participate in hurtful gossip, and sometimes the disruption will involve a more overt action. Sometimes lives are sacrificed as with The Guardians. Sometimes we may embarrass or call attention to ourselves as in the grocery store story.

I’m closing with one of my favorite segments from my favorite show, NCIS. It is what I mean by interrupting darkness...When I retire I’m hoping NCIS will take me, but it’s a question...in this episode, the main character, Jethro Gibbs’ father wants to take him to meet a dying friend from WWII. The father had received a letter from his friend and they had trouble locating him. Gibbs is reluctant because of his schedule, until he learns an interesting twist to the story.

NCIS Clip:

Video 1 -

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/17ulbl2s8k80slk/2nd%20Video%20NCIS.mp4?dl=0>

Video 2 -

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/ai23h1e8yq2ebz5/1st%20Video%20NCIS.mp4?dl=0>

The candle lit today is the Joy candle. It is difficult to grasp how joy emerges from darkness and yet it does. It must. We are all one, as Gibbs’s father said in the clip. And it is oneness that gives us the strength —actually the mandate—to repent of those characteristics of darkness in our own lives and then give life to and produce those fruits that are worthy of that repentance. Amen? Amen!