

Year C, Advent III
 December 16, 2018
 The Rev. Fred Devall

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

The collect for today tells you why today is sometimes called “Stir up Sunday”. The theme of the day is one that summarizes the work of the prophets- to stir up God’s power in such a way that we are moved to turn away from sin and back to reliance solely on God’s grace and mercy to deliver us. At its most basic level the prophetic cycle is a call to move from idolatry and back to God.

Listening to the prophet is only the first step. It’s not enough for us to say that we find his words, “interesting”. King Herod held off on killing John the Baptist because he liked to listen to what John had to say, right up until the time he had John beheaded. Herod heard John’s words, but because they only remained “interesting”, he never acted on them. Instead Herod preferred the idol of self-reliance to God’s grace and mercy being offered by John. Notice that John was not responsible for what Herod did or did not believe. John’s task was to set the truth before Herod in an intelligible way. After that, the prophet’s work is complete.

The prophetic cycle is on display this morning in our reading from Luke. This passage reads like a conversion process:

1. The people engage in sinful behavior: based on the words of John, “Whoever has two coats must share...collect no more than the amount prescribed...do not extort” (Luke 3:11-14), their sinful behavior had to do with greed/avarice/lust of money and power. This has become their idol.
2. The prophet preaches a message that brings their general acknowledgment of their sinful condition into a very specific focus by placing a warning in front of them: Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’ (Luke 3:8). No riding the coattails of someone else- the prophet is speaking directly to you.
3. The exterior stimulus has worked, and they become acutely aware of their own sinfulness, “What then should we do?” (Luke 3:f10).
4. Conversion: “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
5. The mark of repentance, what John calls, “fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8) is certified by changed behavior. Notice that the mark of repentance is not to end world hunger or stop all wars. Worthy as these activities are, John knows those big things will never happen if we don’t first practice righteous behavior on a day-to-day level with our neighbors and in our own community.

The prophetic cycle is set before us today in the same way it has been as long as God's prophets have been at work in the world. It's really an either/or, just like it was for the Israelites when Moses was giving them his farewell address, "Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day...then you will live and increase...but if your heart turns away and you do not listen...I tell you this day that you will perish" (Deuteronomy 30:15-18).

In our church the idol that stands in the way of a deeper life in God is hard to pin down exactly. It is something between indifference and stinginess and it smells like fear. What I'm talking about is stewardship at our church. To be blunt, it's terrible. Less than half the households that claim St. Martin's as their home church have even bothered to return a pledge card for 2019. It's so bad that I can say without hesitation that stewardship is the single greatest spiritual malady that affects us.

There is a general awareness that stewardship in our parish is not very good. It seems we are constantly scraping by to make budget. This isn't a secret. We see the published amounts in our bulletins each week, but week after week nothing changes. Such information is apparently interesting. I used to wonder why that is, and then this year when we printed the budget charts as part of the stewardship education for the 2019 annual budget, I had a bit of a revelation- the mighty pumpkin patch, for all the sweat and energy that goes into it, produces 4% of our annual income. This disproportion of expectation and results tells me that we have a serious problem in our church- we want someone else to pay for our church. "Don't begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'" (Luke 3:8). So long as we continue to expect someone else to fund our church, nothing is going to change. We will continue to run the same budget cycles for years to come.

I also want you to hear that there is a different way to live, one that relies less on ourselves and more on God's grace and mercy, but to get from one side to the other we have to make good on the prophetic cycle- 'Transformation involves giving up what we know for the sake of what we don't know (Fromberg, *The Art of Transformation*, page 2).

The only way this changes is for each and every one here to have a conversion. Notice the conversion is not something that happens to someone else; it happens to you when you ask the Holy Spirit to purify you with fire, to burn away the dross and leave a refined soul that is ready to make a new way. The mark of conversion is not simply that you get baptized. The mark of conversion is changed behavior. When one day we look in the bulletin and see a different set of numbers, we'll have a different set of problems on our hands- living into God's dreams to do big things, but first we must take care of the basic things, like addressing why it is we who have so much are satisfied with giving so little.

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