



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 6, 2009

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Lection - Matthew 3:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,
(v. 2) “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (v.3) This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” (v.4) Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. (v.5) Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, (v.6) and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. (v.7) But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (v.8) Bear fruit worthy of repentance. (v.9) Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these

stones to raise up children to Abraham. (v.10) Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (v.11) I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (v.12) His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Derived from the Latin term “*adventus*” (or “coming”), Advent is the first season of the Christian liturgical year. Traditionally, it includes a period covering four Sundays, beginning with the Sunday closest to November 30th and ending at sundown on Christmas Eve. As the word and the time period suggest, Advent focuses on anticipating and preparing for the coming of Jesus, the Christ.

This sense of anticipation and preparation covers all three dimensions of time. We look back to see and learn from the manner in which the first century ancients longingly anticipated and prepared for the first coming of the Messiah. We look now for ways in which the Anointed might appear in our current circumstances. We also expect and get ready for a future manifestation of the Christ of God in a world that still needs comforting, healing and reconciliation.

African Americans have historically had an earthy first-hand experience with this idea of Advent. For enslaved Africans in the Antebellum South, “Christmas was the most festive holiday of all” because “the slaves received three to six days off to celebrate...”¹ Anticipation surely accompanied the time period preceding this celebratory occasion.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

For many Americans, particularly African Americans, a sense of anticipation akin to that probably felt by those about whom the author of Matthew 3:1-12 wrote loomed large in the period immediately prior to and following the historic election of the first acknowledged African American President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, on November 4, 2008. This heightened anticipation was supported by at least three major factors: gross failures of the preceding White House Administration; a worldwide economic crisis; and the eloquent and pragmatic promises of hope from Mr. Obama.

Many people of faith look to the new, young President to perform a task similar to John’s, the eccentric figure in our text, by preparing the way for God to address some of the most pressing issues of our day. This awesome task, however, does not belong to him alone. We all must join President Obama and John in this preparatory mission if we want to experience a fresh coming of the Christ into our troubled and travailing times.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This text belongs to the introductory portion of Matthew's teaching gospel. Unlike Luke's narrative, which provides religiously infused biographical material on the principal character of this pericope (Luke: 1; 2), this evangelist abruptly presents the raw, rustic personality, John the Baptist, as the striking forerunner of the Messiah, Jesus. As forerunner, John serves as the principal preparer for the coming of a new age wherein God's will reigns in the lives of those who accept God's Christ. We may interpret his preparatory role as taking on four forms in this text: a preparatory message, a preparatory appearance, a preparatory critique, and a preparatory announcement.

Ministering in a desert of the southern province of Judea, John delivered a *preparatory message* of repentance (vv. 2-3) based upon the nearness of the "kingdom of heaven" (an equivalent term to the "kingdom of God," meaning the domain or era of God's perfect rule). His call to repent or to turn from wantonness and wickedness prepares the way for God's kingdom. It urges a fatally flawed people to wrestle their attention away from a wayward, enslaving lifestyle and to direct it toward the approaching age of God's righteous, liberating realm. This spiritually-charged activity, according to the Isaiah-40:3, qualifies John as "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," who prepares the way for the Lord.

John's *preparatory appearance* (v. 4) involves his countrified clothing and simple, nature diet. His raiment of camel's hair and a leather belt immediately connects him with the prototype of Israelite prophecy, Elijah the Tishbite (see II Kings 1:8). The food, locusts and wild honey, suggests his utter dependence on God to provide sustenance, which likewise ties him to the ninth century BCE prophet, who had to rely on divinely-directed ravens for survival by the brook Cherith (I Kings 17:4-6). This literary association signals that John comes as a disturber of the peace – that is, of the pseudo-peace that is built on injustice, exploitation and idolatry. As an Elijah-like figure he prepares the way for the coming Christ.

This disturber role becomes even more evident in John's overt *preparatory critique*. Representatives from two elite, normally opposing, Jewish religious/political parties, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, show up in the desert for baptism by John. Instead of baptizing them, however, John, as it were, reads their ignoble intentions and greets them with a flagrant insult, "You brood of venomous snakes." He then raises a rhetorical question, challenging their sincerity. After this, he admonishes them to live lives ("bear fruit") that demonstrate the type of repentance about which he preaches. Going immediately back into attack mode, John disparages their claims of privilege as supposed "children of Abraham," saying, "God is able to make descendants of the great patriarch out of rocks" (v. 10). John concludes his critique of the Pharisees and Sadducees with a stern warning of imminent divine judgment. This preparatory critique helps to prepare for the Christ's coming in one of two ways: it either offers an opportunity for repentance to those who would oppose God's reign of righteousness in the world, or, if that fails, it at least identifies those who would attempt to thwart the approaching kingdom.

Matthew's presentation of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Christ of God concludes with a *preparatory announcement*. The announcement is this: one more powerful, more worthy, more Spirit-filled, more fiery is on his way. This One will come as judge of the world, to be sure, but also as savior. This portion of the preparation, therefore, is both warning and hope, fear and faith, condemnation and redemption, law and grace.

Celebration

Christ as contemporary Spirit is still coming into the world. So, John's preparatory presentation excites us to the point of crying out in eager anticipation, "Come, Lord Jesus. We seek the forgiveness you bring, the grace you bestow, the love you share, and the fresh, liberating anointing you give."

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The loud, urgent, crying voice of John the Baptist (vv. 2, 7b); the tramping feet of the crowd going down to the Jordan River to be baptized (v. 5); the disturbance of the River as people were baptized (v. 6);

Sights: The barrenness of the wilderness (v. 1); John's rustic clothing (v. 4); the crowds (v. 5); the Jordan River (v. 6); the regal robes of the Pharisees and Sadducees (v. 7);

Smells: Camel's hair (v. 4); the muddy waters of the Jordan (v. 6);

Tastes: Locusts and wild honey (v. 4); and

Textures/Feelings: The roughness of camel's hair and the smoothness of leather (v. 4); the temperature of the Jordan River as people were baptized (v. 6).

III. Other Comments

- John the Baptist, in this text, is described primarily as a voice. His words, divinely anointed and spiritually propelled, became his defining trait, his most glaring attribute, his badge of identity. As a voice, he published sacred tidings that would alter the course of human history in a most radical way. He was just a voice: no frills, no fanfare, no artificial props, no masks, no pomp, no empty ritual, and no pretense. Looking back at John inspires us to celebrate the authentic voices of our African American journey (a long and impressive list of which can be found in Gayraud S. Wilmore's Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 1983).²

But the world today is still in need of voices, who will dare cry out in the wilderness – in the socio-economic-political wilderness, calling for sincere and

sustained efforts to address such massive problems as starvation, AIDS, genocide, educational failure, the criminal justice system, and war; and also in the ecclesiastical/religious wilderness, where too much shallowness, hypocrisy, insincerity, pretension, apathy and dishonesty still abide. Such new voices will help prepare the way of the continuously approaching Kingdom of God.

- Recommended Song – Kumbaya, Traditional African American Tune

Notes

1. Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978. p. 224.
2. Wilmore, Gayraud S. Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983.
3. This famous spiritual's earliest manifestation can be found in "Gullah," the creole or pidgin dialect spoken by former slaves living on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. "Kumbaya." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Online location: <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kumbaya&oldid=310096771> accessed 5 July 2009