

For Private Distribution Only

So here we are at the beginning of Mark’s gospel and, unlike the other two Synoptic gospels—Matthew and Luke—we are greeted not by angels, a pregnant Mary, and perplexed Joseph; but by John the Baptist. He’s in the first chapter of the gospel of John too, and yet he seems a bit out of place in 21st Century Advent, doesn’t he? What if we were to put John the Baptizer and Santa Claus side by side? Can you imagine that juxtaposition? Or better yet, what if we were to ask John trade in his camel’s hair for a red suit; to greet the kids at the mall with a jolly “ho-ho-ho,” and patiently listen to all of their Christmas wish lists? You can bet that a lot, if not all, of those kids would return to their parents in tears. No doubt John the Baptist would have little patience for the secular, consumer Christmas of today. We’d be lucky to get coal in our stockings from him. And be more likely to receive a little fire and brimstone talk of repentance and winnowing forks than a few giant belly laughs. ...And, yet, were we to liken John to Scrooge or the Grinch, we’d be quite mistaken. John the Baptist came not to steal or put a damper on Christmas, but to prepare the way for it.

And what about Isaiah, the 6th Century prophet whom John and, in fact, all four of the gospels quote? Before asking the people to prepare a way for God, Isaiah speaks some of the most soothing words in Hebrew prophecy: “Comfort, O comfort my people...Speak tenderly to them...God will feed the flock like a shepherd; gathering the lambs in God’s arms, carrying them in God’s bosom, and gently leading the mother sheep.” ...It’s all quite lovely and serene, particularly at Christmastime... And yet, like John, Isaiah has a bit of an edge to him. In the same verse as he’s speaking tenderly to the people, he’s also alluding to a double penalty they’ve

received from God's own hand. In the paragraph before God the loving shepherd gently leads them home, a voice is decrying the brevity of their lives and their faithfulness. Not unlike John the Baptist and Santa Claus, these are awkward juxtapositions at best. Harsh, cruel, even abusive at worst. What are we to do with this? Who is this God who cradles lambs with one hand and metes out punishment with the other? Who threatens to discard human chaff with a winnowing fork, but offers baptism by the Holy Spirit to the worthy?...

In my experience, it's always helpful to bear in mind that the Bible, although inspired by God, was written by human beings. And not human beings in a vacuum, but human beings who lived in particular contexts, who had experiences that invariably shaped their perceptions. It's also useful to recall that, when tragic things happen in our lives, the first questions many of us will ask are "Why?", "Why me?", and "Why now?" In the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, God, through the prophet, was warning the comfortable Hebrews that their economic disparities and obliviousness to the needs of the poor and oppressed among them were going to lead them straight into the hands of their enemies, the Assyrians. Two hundred years later, many of them were ending a generation-long time of captivity in Babylon. When the dots had been connected by the second prophet Isaiah, the Babylonians were rendered agents of divine punishment or retribution. Yikes.

I prefer to interpret this situation and others like it as simple matters of cause and effect. That is, when we get too caught up in ourselves, when we put blinders on and forget how our self-centeredness impacts others; there's bound to be a price to be paid. But the presence of God in this equation is in the opportunities, the growth and healing, that emerge in the aftermath of those negative consequences. And in those opportunities another truth about God and ourselves is

revealed: That God is always actively waiting for us to turn around, to willingly look away from whatever has lured us away and turn our faces back toward the light of God. It is not God who moves away from or rejects us, but vice versa. Not sackcloth and ashes or shame, but *this* humble choice of light over darkness is what repentance is. And, as the radical inclusivity of Jesus' ministry so powerfully demonstrates, John the Baptist had it wrong about the winnowing fork.

Now we can make these choices as individuals. We can observe Advent like the Jewish high holy days and seek to turn around and prepare our hearts and our lives for a new year of God's love incarnate by confessing and making amends to those whom we have wronged over the past year. This is a part the purpose of Advent, which has also been called "Little Lent." But in both the contexts of Isaiah and of John the Baptist, what was ultimately being called out by the prophets were the wrongs of the community and the nation. So as we prepare to receive the ultimate gift of God's love once again, we will want to get our house in order together. Recently we cleaned out the closets and handily disposed of some no longer useful physical items. What if we were to extend that exercise to the spiritual and emotional realms? What closets are crowded with junk? What mountains and valleys need to be leveled and roads need to be paved in preparation for the son of God's arrival in our house?

We've talked a lot here about the consumerism, wealth, and greed that currently pollute our nation's house and about how the Occupy movements may offer some hope of a turning around and a divine in-breaking in the larger world. But, in closing, I'd like to offer you another contemporary illustration: As you probably know, Thursday was World AIDS Day. It doesn't get as much attention as it used to. And this is, in part, good news. The drugs have caught up to the

epidemic and many in our country now lead long and active lives with the disease. But this was not the case in Africa until a modern day prophet stepped up. One of my favorite musicians, Bono from the Irish rock band U2, approached a number of our nation's political and business leaders with a sense of urgency about the plights of infected Africans who had no access to the life saving medications. In 2002, just 50,000 in Sub-Saharan Africa were being medicated. Today 6 million people are being treated, and there is actually very real hope that this global epidemic will meet its end in the not to distant future. In a New York Times editorial this past week, Bono attributed the great strides that have been made in the past than 10 years to the dedication and the cooperation of some diverse and unlikely coalitions of people: Democrat and Republican politicians, the gay community and evangelical Christians, Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama...¹ And you thought John the Baptist and Santa Claus were an odd combination!

Often the concept of hope can seem naïve and child-like. Foolish and unrealistic. Once in awhile we're reminded that it's not. Maybe that's precisely why God's love and hope for the world came to us in the form of an infant.

¹ Bono: "A Decade of Progress on AIDS," New York Times, www.nytimes.com/2011/12/01/.../a-decade-of-progress-on-aids.html, November 30, 2011.