

3 Advent, Year C  
December 13, 2009  
St. Ann's, Old Lyme

Come, O Come, Emmanuel: Come and be among us;  
Come and teach us your ways. Come enliven us by your Spirit.  
Come and save us, Lord our God. Amen.

To the crowds that came out to be baptized, John the Baptist began his sermon: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Can you imagine bringing a beloved child to church to be baptized, and hearing that as the sermon? Sounds to me more like terrorism than Good News. I’d rather hear what Paul said to the Philippians: ‘Don’t worry about anything, and the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and minds.’

But that wasn’t John the Baptist’s style. Hardly. But for all that John’s ‘font-side manner’ leaves something to be desired, I bet he got their attention. He certainly gets mine. And prophets – like John the Baptist – are supposed to get out attention. Prophets are called by God to get our attention – to see and to proclaim the difference between what is going on in the world and what God would like to have go on in the world.

To be sure, prophets are people who tend not to be invited to dinner a second time, but for all that John the Baptist would never have made it as a diplomat, he had his job to do, and he was about that job. He had something to say to those people, and he said it. God is coming, John preached, and you folks are in big trouble.

If we heard that kind of preaching, we might well decide to stay home the next week, but interestingly enough, the folks who heard John the Baptist not only hung around, but they also engaged this fiery preacher in conversation.

‘O.K., John,’ they said, ‘you’ve warned us that God is coming. Now tell us, what should we do about it? And of course, John was not at a loss for words in his reply. Not surprisingly, John told them exactly what he thought they should do.

First, said John, don’t count on the gene pool to rescue you. Claiming that ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor’ doesn’t cut it with God. What does work with God is repentance. And then John talked about what repentance might look like, and how the ‘fruits of repentance’ would make a difference in people’s lives. For example, said he, if you have two coats, share with someone who has no coat at all. That’s one ‘fruit’ of repentance – sharing.

Another fruit is understanding that even though we can’t change what we did yesterday or the day before, we can change what we do today or tomorrow. It was in that spirit

that John didn't even bother to ask how much the tax collectors had stolen in the past; instead, he told them to be honest from that moment on. Neither did he ask the soldiers about their past; but he did tell them to 'play nice' in the future.

Well, guess what. It's not just 'those people' - tax collectors and soldiers - to whom John was speaking. He spoke also to you and to me. John the Baptist spoke to us, because just like those first century folks who claimed Abraham as their ancestor, neither can we claim salvation because of our DNA.

And, like our first century forbears, we can do nothing to change yesterday, but we too can do a lot about today and tomorrow. And for us, just as it was for the people John addressed face to face, repentance is the key. Our very hope lies in repentance. And hope is really what it's all about.

Unfortunately, it's often considered hopelessly naïve to hope too much. We're even taught not to get our hopes up, so we won't be disappointed. Don't give coats to the poor; it's hopeless - they'll just sell them and spend the proceeds on drugs. Don't hope too much for peace. Somebody out there is always ready to pull a trigger, or plant yet another land mine, or serve as a suicide bomber.

The message that the world delivers is this: don't hope too much, and you won't be disappointed. But what John the Baptist proclaimed (albeit in his own strange way) was just the opposite: we can have hope; indeed we must have hope.

John the Baptist, a prophet called by God to see and proclaim the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of God, told us then - and tells us now that we can and must have hope, hope that shows forth in our lives as repentance.

Repentance means that with God's help, we can change. To be sure, we can't change the past or escape the consequences of bad choices, but repentance does mean that we're not stuck in the past nor held captive to past failures.

Repentance also insists that we stop relying on our own strength and start relying on the promises received in Baptism, that we let God's power work in us and around us. And we let God's power work in us and around us by opening our hands both to share what we have and to receive all that God would give us. And God gives us so much. Most of us here in Old Lyme have at least two coats.

We also have each other. Some wise soul once wrote that: 'we are each of us angels, with only one wing, and we can fly only by embracing each other. Most importantly, we have God's promise to come among us. God promised to come among us, and God fulfilled that promise in a cold dark stable in Bethlehem.

You and I have a great advantage of that 'brood of vipers' to whom John the Baptist spoke directly. They didn't know about that cold dark stable in Bethlehem; we do. They hadn't seen the Savior; we have.

When that 'brood of vipers' to whom John preached back then heard that God is coming, they were terrified, but they still summoned the courage to ask: 'what shall we do?' May God grant us that same kind of courage. God has promised to come among us. What shall we do?

Well, we can repent and pray that we may bear the fruits of that repentance. We can share a coat, especially if we have two, or more.

We can also embrace a fellow one-winged angel, so that when our Savior comes, together we may soar to greet Him. Amen.

The Rev. Nancy Miller