

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Tate, Priest Associate, at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral, on 2 Advent, Sunday, December 5, 2010.

I.

I am an inveterate procrastinator. I never seem to get around to doing anything until the very last minute. I work best under deadline pressure. Always have.

That's why I love the liturgical season of Advent. While everyone else in our culture seems to be well into Christmas decorations, Christmas presents, and Christmas carols, I am blissfully far behind them, in what seems at times like my own private season of Advent. You see, I am the kind of person who buys and decorates the Christmas tree just a few days before Christmas. I used to do it on Christmas Eve, but that drove my family nuts. I am the kind of person who tells people on Christmas Day what I am going to give them for a present when I get around to buying it. I am the kind of person who sends Epiphany cards instead of Christmas cards.

Advent is an in between time. An already but not yet time. A time to turn towards God. A time of spiritual preparation. A time of quiet waiting. A time of hopeful expectation for the advent of God's Kingdom.

II.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

Jesse was the father of King David.

David's Kingship around the year 1000 BC was the high point in the history of ancient Israel. Under King David's rule, Israel was peaceful and prosperous for over 40 years. King David was a powerful warrior, who defeated Goliath and conquered the Philistines, a brilliant statesman and respected judge, and a magnificent poet who actually did write many of the Psalms of David attributed to him.

But the golden age of King David did not last. After his death, there was a fight for succession won by Solomon and his scheming mother, Bathsheeba, and after that, things went from bad to worse. Prophets soon emerged, who warned that God was angry at Israel for abandoning the covenant, for mistreating the poor and the powerless. These early prophets warned the people of Israel to repent, to change their evil ways, to turn back to God. And these prophets promised that God would soon act decisively to put things right.

One of those early prophets was named Isaiah. Isaiah proclaimed that God would soon send a descendent of Jesse and David to destroy the corrupt leadership of Israel and to reestablish the divine monarchy on earth. Isaiah envisioned a new Jerusalem, Mount Zion, ruled by a worthy successor to King David, who would be wise and righteous, and

would bring justice to the poor and equity to the powerless. Even more, proclaimed Isaiah, God would soon usher in a new Eden, where all of creation would live in peace and harmony. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” What a wonderful vision!

But the people of Israel did not listen to the prophet Isaiah. We can imagine the cynicism with which the Israelites must have heard Isaiah’s utopian prophecy. As the great theologian Woody Allen once put it: “The wolf may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.”

Of course we know what happened. God did intervene. The Babylonians invaded and occupied Israel, destroyed the Temple of Solomon, and took all of the political and religious leaders of Israel into captivity far away in Babylon.

There, in exile, a new prophetic voice emerged. He was also named Isaiah, and his writings are included in the same Book of Isaiah as the First Isaiah. Biblical scholars sometimes call this prophet of the exile Second Isaiah. This Second Isaiah proclaimed that God would soon intervene again, freeing Israel from captivity. And he proclaimed that a sign that God was about to act would be a voice, crying in the wilderness, “prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” God would metaphorically create a level, straight highway over the mountains and through the wilderness, a highway for the people of Israel to return from Babylon to Zion, the new Jerusalem.

Of course we know what happened. God did intervene. The Persians defeated the Babylonians and the Israelites were freed. The people of Israel returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple of Solomon. But history has a way of repeating itself. It was not exactly another golden age. No new King David emerged. Instead, there were numerous factions vying for political and religious control. Sadducees and their allies, the Temple priests; Pharisees and their allies, the synagogue rabbis; mystery cults like the Essenes; political radicals like the Zealots. And for the poor and the powerless, life was worse than ever.

So the prophets of the post exile, the return, echoing ancient First Isaiah, echoing Second Isaiah, predicted once again that God would soon send a messiah to reestablish the throne of King David. And these prophets, like Nehemiah, Micah, and Joel, again told the people to repent, to change their ways, to turn back to the Lord. And these prophets again warned that God was about to intervene in a dramatic new way. And Centuries went by.

III.

Enter John the Baptist. The long-awaited voice crying in the wilderness, “prepare the way of the Lord.” John was a modern day prophet living in the desert wilderness outside of Jerusalem. He was a pretty scary guy. Dressed in clothing made from camel’s hair. Eating locusts and wild honey. John proclaimed to the people of Israel: “Repent, for the

kingdom of heaven has come near.” And John predicted that God was about to send a new divine monarch, a new King David, a messiah, who would judge the people of Israel.

The extraordinary thing was that the people of Israel actually did listen to John the Baptist. They came out in droves to the banks of the Jordan River to hear him preach. They waded out into the water to be baptized. They promised to repent and to change their ways.

In fact, John was so successful as a prophet that even he began to be suspicious. When even Pharisees and Sadducees began to show up at the Jordan, he lost his temper and railed against them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you, of all people, to flee from the wrath to come? You hypocrites! You are the religious authorities who are responsible for the mess Israel is in. You spend all your energy fighting each other for power while the poor sink ever deeper into misery. Don’t think just because you say prayers in the temple or the synagogue every day that you will be spared. You will be judged by your fruits, your results, not your facile words or your superficial religiosity.”

It is interesting how history repeats itself. This week, reading the reports out of Washington DC, that the Republicans and Democrats are hopelessly gridlocked, unable to pass any legislation, and reading the reports about unfathomable corruption in the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan, I could almost hear the rant of John the Baptist: “You brood of vipers! You hypocrites! Arguing over tax cuts for millionaires while unemployment benefits expire for millions of Americans, feathering your own nests in Iraq and Afghanistan while young soldiers and innocent civilians are dying around you every day! But you will be held accountable. You will be judged by your fruits.”

John the Baptist capped off his prophecy with a blast worthy of First or Second Isaiah: “One who is more powerful than I is coming. I baptize you with water for repentance. But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit of God and with fire, separating the righteous from the unrighteous, the wheat from the chaff, the fruitful trees from the unfruitful trees. And the chaff, the bad wood, the unrighteous, he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

IV.

But even John the Baptist didn’t get it quite right. John the Baptist, like most of the other prophets down through the centuries, expected the advent of the Kingdom of God through the agency of a new King David, a divine human warrior king who would set things right.

But we believe that the real advent of the Kingdom of God came in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Born in an obscure corner of Judea, in the feed trough of a cow, to an unwed teenage girl. Raised as the son of a carpenter in a fishing town on the banks of the Sea of Galilee.

One day, when he was about thirty years old, this Jesus from Nazareth came out to the banks of the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. The real miracle of this Advent story is that John the Baptist immediately recognized the savior of the world in this ordinary Galilean carpenter. He pointed at Jesus and pronounced, “This is the one I said would come!” Not a warrior King, but an ordinary Galilean. Not a powerful ruler who would impose his will on politicians and priests, but a suffering servant who would offer his life for the sins of the world.

That is the real spirit of this Advent season. As the preacher William Sloane Coffin, Jr. once put it, “The Kingdom of God arrives with all the power of a snowflake and all the force of a hint.”

Which is why, during the next few weeks, we need to slow down, to quiet down, to prepare ourselves spiritually for the rebirth of the savior into our world and into our lives.

The Kingdom of God is so very, very near. But we need to be very, very careful.

Because in all the noise and frenzy of Christmas, it is so easy to miss the real Advent of Jesus Christ.

Happy Advent.

Amen

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