

SERMON for Sunday, December 17, 2007
 Luke 3:7-18, Philippians 4:4-7

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Fire, Brimstone, and Peace

The Christmas picture card came last week: a young soldier in full battle gear, kneeling in the sandy Afghanistan countryside, with his hand outstretched to a tiny barefoot girl in a well-worn mint green dress. His smile was gentle, her expression tentative. His eyes were warm and offered welcome, hers wary and cool. He desired contact but knew enough to be slow in his effort. She desired contact but knew enough not to trust just anyone.

And there it is, the word of the Lord for this week. It is a word suspended in a world of both violence and complacency, a world of innocence and hate, a world of anxiety and hope. It is into our world that we hear the message of John the Baptist, which does not do much to soothe our souls and relieve our fears. With little regard for our Advent sensitivities, John gets right at it, pronouncing all those who had gathered to be cleansed by water, a rite of purification, pronouncing them a *brood of vipers*, poisonous snakes who were bringing harm and spewing venom. And he called for them to repent, to do something better with their lives, to somehow demonstrate to the world that the God who loves them has changed their very souls. He tells everyone to share their coats and their food. He tells the tax collectors to stop making extra money by charging more than is owed. He tells the soldiers to stop bullying. He minced no words about the consequences of sin as he told them what to expect from Jesus, *...the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*. And then John had the audacity to proclaim that it was good news. Ha!

How could news calling us to accountability be good? Isn't this the season of good will, when we are supposed to laugh and smile and sing fa-la-la? Isn't this the time when we should be able to shelve our worries and focus on giving? December seems to bring out the worst, and best of our personal behavior. Greediness, selfishness, family feuds, grumpiness over the perceived lack of time, social obligations and extra expense all seem to thwart our sense of joy and wonder. On the other hand, coins in the kettles, generosity to charities, warm reunions and celebrations display the better side. Our emotional life takes a few twists and turns during these days as well. It is not news that sadness and loss are felt more keenly, that a lack of a job or a struggle with finances or a health crisis can take away the season's possibilities. A moment of calm, a moment of respite would be nice, we think. Add to this a topsy-turvy world situation and we are prone to wonder – wonder not about stars and shepherds and angels, but about the promises of the prophets for a Messiah of transformation, a Savior of redemption, a Child of grace. This Advent journey is not necessarily an easy one.

In a meditation on our gospel reading from Luke, Pastor Heidi Armstrong begins, *Commanding stages across the land, and even a few pulpits, the National Prayer Breakfast, and the Willow Creek Association, he laments the global wildfire of AIDS consuming 8,000 lives every day. One person every 10 seconds. Describing the horror of seeing African refugees queuing up to die, three to a bed, he delivers a stinging rebuke: 'We can get cold fizzy drinks to the farthest reaches of Africa, but we can't get lifesaving medicines to the people who need it most?' The lead singer of the rock band U2, Bono, confesses: 'I don't have any letters after my name...I don't even have a name after my name...but I am determined to turn around this*

supertanker of indifference.' It has long been the job description of prophets, including John, who came preaching a baptism of repentance. He, too, was intent upon turning around a supertanker of human indifference – indifference to the Living God. Indifference? What a charge to make about us.

This same message was told in a different way by author and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, retelling an old Jewish Hasidic tale. *Rebbe Barukh's grandson, Yehiel, came running into his study in tears. 'Yehiel, Yehiel, why are you crying?' 'My friend cheats! It's unfair; he left me all by myself, that's why I am crying.'* 'Would you like to tell me about it?' 'Certainly, Grandfather. We played hide-and-seek, and it was my turn to hide and his turn to look for me. So he gave up; he stopped looking. And that's unfair.' *Rebbe Barukh began to caress Yehiel's face, and tears welled up in his eyes. 'God too, Yehiel,' he whispered softly. 'God too is unhappy; he is hiding and man is not looking for him. Do you understand, Yehiel? God is hiding and man is not even searching for him.'* In fact, Elie Wiesel, a Romanian-Hungarian Jew who was sent to Auschwitz as a teenager, and who after his release spent his life writing about its horrors, proclaimed that *to remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all.*

What then is the good news? *There is one who is coming, says John, who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.* The good news amidst the fire and brimstone is transformation, bit by bit, by the power of God's love in Christ. I think it is the bit by bit that trips us up sometimes. We are uncomfortable with that big space between war and peace, between despair and joy, between the haves and the have-nots, between what we should do and what we actually do, between sin and forgiveness. We hear that message of John the Baptist, and ask the same question, *What should we do? What should I do?* I think I was somewhat surprised as over the years the light gradually dawned on my understanding that the Advent gospel readings are the most radical messages of all Scripture. I have one foot, and sometimes more, firmly in the culture – for here is where we live – and I absolutely look forward to Christmas. I eagerly await the letters and pictures and cards arriving in the mail, chuckling at the multitude of details of health and travel and family that some would choose to share. I enjoy the stuff of the holidays – baking, decorating, lights, music, traditions. Whether it be one hundred tubas in the Capitol rotunda or the scent of peppermint and cinnamon, I like it all. And so I am prepared for the tender touches of promise. Sappy movies of homecomings and reconciliations, babies and strangers being welcomed, the deepest expressions of love. Isn't that the good news? Only in part, I have slowly discovered, a small part.

The late El Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, murdered by his enemies while he was preparing to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, said, *A gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed, what gospel is that?* This is the gospel that John the Baptist preaches, an unsettling message of how we prepare the way for Jesus to be seen, to be recognized, to be welcomed. We prepare the way for Jesus. We share our food, we share our coats, we welcome the stranger, we give a ride to a mother and children who want to visit their incarcerated father, we tutor students who need an educational boost, we are a listening ear for a grieving friend. The message is not that we seek to be comfortable or happy, but that we seek to be just, we seek to be compassionate. We seek to prepare the way for Jesus, offering a fresh start and a new beginning to those who have come to the end of their rope.

Harvard University professor Diana Eck speaks of this unsettling and uncomfortable gospel when she recently wrote a Christmas meditation, *Morally Speaking*. She began her essay by reporting that numerically there are more people in the United States who claim to be Christian, 85%, than any other religion. And she reminded her readers that constitutionally we are governed by a Constitution that promises no state-sponsored religion and the free exercise of religion. And then she addressed the question, *Are we morally a Christian nation? This is a matter for some soul-searching for those of us who are Christians. Can our nation's priorities in foreign policy and foreign aid be described as Christian? Have we demonstrated Christian principles in war-making or peace-making? I don't think so. Is it a moral good to consume far more than our share of non-renewable energy resources, creating for ourselves a standard of living that does not know the meaning of the word 'enough' and that acquiesces in a world of unconscionable economic disparities? Perhaps we should remember that the most fundamental teachings of the Gospel proclaim that we will be judged by what we do 'for the least of these' – for the stranger, the prisoner, the homeless, the hungry.*

We are all strangers, we are homeless, we are hungry, we are empty, we are lonely. And to us and to the world Jesus comes. The news is indeed good. Jesus is near, so near that we can see and touch God's saving grace.

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American poet Maya Angelou wrote, *Of all the needs a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaken need for an unshakable God.* Fire and brimstone – and peace. Amen.