

Advent Longings: Longing for One Tough Master?

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 3:7-18

Ron Parker, a United Methodist colleague, years ago wrote a reflection on today's text:

*I am a forest,
A diverse multiplicity of trees
Some tall, strong, in their prime,
Others twisted by harsh environment,
or unfortunate location.
Fresh seedlings spring up in open spaces
or struggle in the underbrush,
future replacements for the noble old.

Now, in the midst of Advent,
I see a tree that has outgrown its place,
does not produce, inhibits growth.
Though I've grown used to it,
cannot imagine it cut away,
I know it must be given up,
the ax laid to its root
to make room for new shoots to spring forth.

It causes pain to cut away
what has been part of my life forest,
but a voice cries...Prepare the way...*

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that during this Advent season the words and music don't always match, indeed often seem contradictory. On the one hand we have the Hallmark Christmas – charming winter scenes, doves, smiling angels and a cuddly baby, warm in a manger. But on the other hand, we have John the Baptist, preaching fire, speaking of the ax lying at the foot of the tree, pointing beyond himself to one who is coming with a winnowing fork in his hand and who is ready to separate the wheat from the chaff. Not exactly a comforting image for a Christmas card. John seemingly is pointing us toward the coming of one tough master...someone who has expectations of us, someone who is going to make some changes around here. Why, year after year, must we go through John and his "you brood of vipers" preaching in order to get to the manger at Bethlehem? There must be an easier, more comfortable path.

In W.H. Auden's, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, King Herod, wanting to take that practical, reasonable, comfortable path to Christmas, says this: "O God, put away justice and truth for we cannot understand them and do not want them. Leave the heavens and come down...Become our uncle. Look after Baby, amuse grandfather, escort Madam to the opera, help Willy with his homework, and introduce Muriel to a handsome naval officer. Be interesting and weak like us, and we will love you as we love ourselves."

I can understand those sentiments, that desire for an easy, comfortable God and an equally easy and comfortable Christmas. It was the theologian, Karl Barth, who once said, "Christians go to church to make their last stand against God." Again, it's the time of year for carols and cookies and warm fuzzies. And how tempting it is for the preacher, this preacher, to buy into all that and do everything he can to stabilize and tame the incursions of a living, interrupting, somewhat out-of-control God. But John, bless his little heart, will have none of that. He wants us to know that when the Messiah comes, there will be no where to hide from the awesome, even demanding truth of Christmas...God with us. John is talking about something so much bigger, so much deeper, than a sentimental, holly, jolly Christmas.

During his years as President, Abraham Lincoln would often attend the Wednesday evening service of the New York Presbyterian Church which was located near the White House. The story is told that one evening, as he was leaving the service, Lincoln was asked by one of his aides, "Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon tonight?"

Lincoln responded, "The content was excellent, and Dr. Gurley – the minister – spoke with great eloquence. It was obvious that he put a great deal of work into that sermon."

"So you thought it was a great sermon?" his aide asked.

"No," answered Lincoln, "I did not say that."

"But Sir, you said it was an excellent sermon."

Lincoln replied, "No, I said that the content was excellent and that the preacher spoke with great eloquence. But tonight Dr. Gurley forgot one important matter. He forgot to ask us to do something great."

Could that be what our text is about? Beneath all his rather colorful language, could this be what John is saying about the One who is coming...that he is going to ask us to do something great and that we had best be ready? And so when those in the crowd, perhaps seeking a little clarification, ask, "What then should we do?" John has an answer. He tells them that if they have two coats, they ought to give one away to someone who needs a coat. If they have extra food, they need to share it with someone who is hungry. To

the tax collectors in the crowd, those corrupt collaborators with Rome, he advises honesty – what a concept! “Put an end to lining your pockets at the expense of everybody else and collect no more than the law allows. Learn to be satisfied with sharing a little more and having a little less,” he urges...some interesting first century advice in these days of the pending fiscal cliff! And finally, to the soldiers in the crowd he admonishes them to quit using their overwhelming power to extract money from the powerless.

John is saying that there is an ethical dimension to this Advent and Christmas thing, that some re-prioritization is in order, and that yes, as Ron Parker’s poetry reminds us, there may be some comfortable, familiar parts of our life’s forest that may have to be cut away to make room for new growth...for Christ’s new possibilities. John wants to know, just how far, just how deep, are we willing to go with the One whose advent we await?

A pastor shares this story. “One December our church had a food drive for the hungry in our city. We put a big banner out on the lawn of our church and invited all the community to bring food to our church where we would be sure that it would be faithfully distributed to the poor. The climax of the food drive was to be on Christmas. Our goal was to collect enough food so that the community food pantry would have food for the next six months.

“One of our members called and said that they were going to have guests from out of town in their home for Christmas. They had looked forward to bringing their guests to our Christmas Eve service, but because of, in their words, “that really unattractive banner on the lawn of the church,” they decided to go to another church for Christmas Eve.

“That banner, appealing for stuff, just doesn’t seem the spirit of Christmas,” they said.

I think of the slogan the U.S. Army uses in its TV pitch...“Be all that you can be.” I believe John the Baptist would agree with that, in deed that Jesus of Nazareth would agree with that. And that is why I believe the critics of that church banner pleading for food for the hungry were wrong. The babe of Bethlehem is meant to be loved in this world, here and now. He did not come among us to show us how to escape from this world into some ideal existence. No, he walked among us in this world and called us to be his faithful disciples in this world. What is the Kingdom-oriented life, the life that is faithful to the promise of Christmas? John pretty well outlines it for us: share what you have, don’t take more than you need, dare to be an incarnation of God’s love and justice among the abandoned, forgotten and marginalized. And don’t be afraid to take the axe to whatever it is in your life that keeps you from doing just that. Dare to do something great. Dare to be all that you can be. For the miracle of the nativity is a miracle that takes place right here, right now, among and within us.

I had just finished this sermon when I heard of the unspeakable violence at the Sandy Hook elementary school in New Town, CT., on Friday. And it threw me into a kind of preaching and faith crisis. I found myself, as I’m sure many of you were, deeply depressed and actually close to tears all afternoon. I am sure that part of the reason for my strong reaction is that our grandson Ben is five years old, near the age of many of the children who were killed. I looked over the words of my sermon and wondered how they could possibly have any meaning, any relevance, in the face of such evil. They seemed so puny and weak. How can the promises of Advent and Christmas really have any meaning at all in a society – a country – where such a thing can happen, in one form or another over and over again, and we seem quite willing to tolerate it? Now it is consuming our children. I think of those twenty homes with empty little beds and Christmas presents that will never be unwrapped and any sermon seems useless.

But then my mind goes back to the fiery preaching of John the Baptist. Clearly he was fed up with the world as it was, with its injustice, its inequality, its cruelty. But he did not walk away. Instead he still dared to hope...he dared to see a new world a comin’. He anticipated the advent of One who will teach a new way, will walk a different path, will open us to the possibility of a new world and who will not give in to or accept any darkness. And so John refused to give up or give in. So what if the odds were against him. He may not live to see his dream fulfilled, but still it energized him, it changed him, it shaped his life and his priorities. Rather than abandoning the promise, he proclaimed and lived it even more passionately. And so, hopefully, can we. You see, even when we come here with heavy and darkened hearts, there is still good news to proclaim.

John is saying that we can take up new lives, lives worthy of the One for whom we wait. Because to all of us who live far from centers of power and influence, who live rather ordinary lives, engaged mostly in rather ordinary, everyday tasks and responsibilities, besieged by all manner of cares and concerns, to all of us – you and me – Messiah is coming. He calls us where we are to follow him just as we are, so that as we follow we truly can have the hope of being all that we can be....to act as he acted, to love as he loved. Which is to say that our lives really do count for something.

So come and see: come and see the Word made flesh that has come to dwell among us; come and see a life that is more about its quality than its quantity; come and see what it looks like to participate in the incarnated life. I don’t know how far away we are from that new world promised in the birth at Bethlehem. But I do know that we are called to live and pray and witness as if it were just around the corner. People, don’t quit now because in my heart I know, I know, it’s going to come, in spite of all the evident to the contrary, it will come.