

Look Again and Again -- Advent2C

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, who has looked favorably on the people and redeemed them. Who has raised up a mighty savior for us as promised through the mouth of holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, that we, being rescued from their hand, might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days.”

The Song of Zechariah, as this passage from Luke’s gospel is known, lifts up the prophecy of the past to explain current events, as he speaks to his infant son John: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace

Henri Nouwen was “...struck by the fact that the prophets speaking about the future of Israel always kept reminding their people of God’s great works in the past. They could look forward with confidence because they could look backward with awe to Yahweh’s great deeds.” The same is true of Nations and all peoples. Progress is always connected to a refreshing of the collective memory. We undertake a searching and fearless moral inventory of what has been in order to bring about what might be. We must not regret the past, nor shut the door on it, but look upon it with rigorous honesty. The expectation of Advent is

anchored in the event of God's incarnation. The more we come in touch with what happened in the past, the more we come in touch with what is to come. By looking back in meditation, we can look forward in expectation. By reflection, we can project; by conserving the memory of Christ's birth, we can progress to the fulfillment of his kingdom. Wrote Nouwen: "I pray that Advent will offer me the opportunity to deepen my memory of God's great deeds in time, and will set me free to look forward with courage to the fulfillment of time by him who came and is still to come."

The Book of Malachi is post-exilic prophesy. The Israelites have been liberated from Babylon and have returned to their homeland in Judah. The 2nd Temple is up and running. Things are looking up when this book is composed – the Persians are in charge, but they are not insufferably oppressive as the Babylonians have been, and as the Romans will be. It's not somebody's name, Malachi. It means 'The Messenger.' The book is by an anonymous author, about whom nothing is said. Perhaps it is a collaboration, whose twin purposes are to reiterate the joyful assurance that justice will indeed ultimately prevail on Earth with the coming of the Lord: "And He will purify." And its purpose is to remind us that preparation for the coming of God includes a call to repentance and purification ourselves, as we are able.

John fulfills the prophecies of old, he is the voice of one in the wilderness crying out, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make God's paths straight." John's life and ministry are about God, specifically about Jesus, the one who will come

after him. For John, the baptismal sacrament is a ritual cleansing that everyone needs to reconcile themselves with the Good: “He washed my sins away...” In his time the strict Essenes bathed quite a bit. They lived in Qumran, where some of the oldest biblical texts have been found, and where scholars think John had his spiritual formation after being orphaned from Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were already old when John was born. The Essene rituals called for repeated cleansing baths to maintain purity; there were fourteen cisterns and a water catchment system in the Qumran complex. But they kept themselves apart from the rest of society. John, on the other hand became convinced that such isolation could not serve God’s purposes. The Word of the Lord as he heard it called him to preach to the people of Judea and baptize them, cleansing their bodies from sin, even as they cleansed their souls by acknowledging and asking forgiveness for their sins.

This was not just repenting as in ‘change your ways,’ it was ‘think again’ repenting. Think again about what is, what is right, what is legitimate, who has authority, what constitutes wealth, what is the basis for hope, who rules the universe? John the Baptist breaks into the society of his day, challenging the political, military, commercial and religious establishments, and demanding that the people see all these establishments differently, because they aren’t in tune with the sacred precepts of God: mercy, justice, humility, charity, submission, gratitude, awe. John the Baptist represents a passionate alternative view of society, antithetical to the status quo and thus dangerous to and demonized by the ‘powers that be,’ of his day, both Roman and Hebrew.

Governments are still unjust; the strong and established punish, incarcerate, exile and kill the poor, the weak, the desperately troubled and the foreign. Military might is still all too often used to control whomever a nation would exploit for commerce, instead of for safety and freedom from tyranny. Today, commercial systems still force the very many to enrich the very few. And many religious establishments all over the world humiliate, overburden, infuriate, alienate and jeopardize people just like they did in John's day. Although much good is indeed done in the name of faith, all too much is left undone.

Repentance is not just ruefully admitting that we have done the things we ought not to have done. Repentance is thinking again and again and again about those things, and what they say about who we are. It is a matter of critically and creatively examining what we do in order to determine what are the things we ought to have done but haven't. Conventional Wisdom is one of the great oxymorons. Yes, we have to pick our battles. And yes, the wise submit to existing conditions when they are helpless to change them, but evils that are addressable and avoidable must be rooted out without sparing one single moment or effort. If there are persistent evils in ourselves or in our society that we are capable of addressing but do not – endless gun violence protected by so-called 'freedoms' is one obvious example – we cannot say that our preparations for the coming of the Lord are fine. We are not making the crooked straight, nor the rough places plain. As the great Yogi Berra would have it, we can expect to be included out.

Many of us have a vision of the kind of person God wants us to be. We must be true to that vision, whatever it is, and we must try to live into it. In all people, there is goodness that is of God: a life we could live, that God wants for us. We are afforded a daily reprieve from our sins, based on our desire to perceive and pursue who God wants us to become.

Wrote Thomas Merton: “All Christians are enabled and obliged to renounce sin and give themselves completely, without compromise to Christ, in order that they may fulfill their baptismal promises, enter into the mystery of God and there find themselves perfectly ‘in the light if Christ.’ As St. Paul reminds us ‘we are not our own.’ We belong entirely to Christ; whose Spirit has taken possession of us at baptism. We are the Temples of the Holy Spirit. Our thoughts, our actions, our desires are more rightly God’s than our own. But we have to struggle to ensure that God always receives from us what we owe by right.

“O Lord, awaken us from the comfortable existence in which we may too often be safely cocooned, and challenge us to accept the call of our baptism. Afflict us with your grace, so that we may take seriously our efforts to aid the poor, to comfort the sad and lonely, to change ourselves and our society for the better, and to let our light shine as a beacon to all who can use our help.”