

The Sunday Missive – December 12, 2021

Hymn 76 On Jordan's bank the Baptist's Cry

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken, for he brings glad tidings of the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every breast from sin; make straight the way for God within,
And let each heart prepare a home where such a mighty guest may come.

For thou art our salvation, Lord, our refuge and our great reward;
Without thy grace we waste away like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out thine hand, and bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let thy light restore earth's own true loveliness once more.

All praise, eternal Son, to thee, whose advent doth thy people free;
Whom with the Father we adore and Holy Spirit evermore.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHTjCfRFL1I>

Lighting the Advent Wreath

Holy One, we praise you for your child Jesus Christ, who is Emmanuel, the hope of the peoples, the wisdom that teaches and guides us, the Savior of every nation. Let your blessing come upon us as we light this wreath. May it be a sign of Christ's promise to bring us salvation.

God of glory and compassion, at your touch the wilderness blossoms, broken lives are made whole, and fearful hearts grow strong in faith. Open our eyes to your presence and awaken our hearts to sing your praise. To all who long for your Son's return grant perseverance and patience, that we may announce in word and deed the good news of the kingdom. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near: your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord.

The First Song of Isaiah

Surely, it is God who saves me* ***I will trust in him and not be afraid.***

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense* ***And he will be my Savior.***

Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing* ***From the springs of salvation.***

And on that day you shall say* ***Give thanks to the Lord and call upon God's Name.***

Make his deeds known among the peoples* ***See that they remember that God's name is exalted.***

Sing the praises of the Lord, who has done great things* ***Let it be known in all the world.***

Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy* ***For the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.***

Philippians 4: 4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Hymn 438 Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Savior shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name -- the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by.
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and forevermore!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0>

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Vipers r Us -- Advent 3C

A brood of vipers! Who wants to be called that? Especially when we're all snugly and wassaily, getting ready for our first Christmas in years. What is John the Baptist doing, and why are we talking about it now? John was doing some preaching, some prophetic preaching. Because of that, convenience and comfort were not big concerns of his. He was illuminating the present and announcing the future, which is what Advent is all about and always has been: a single star in the night

sky announces the light of the world; a little baby in a stable is God's very self, surpassing death; Christ with us and Christ to come.

Like a good preacher, John had practical illustrations from daily life to illustrate the wider story of God's grace, but he was not an easy fellow to enjoy. In the King James: "John was clothed with camel's hair, with a girdle of skins about his loins. And he did eat locusts and wild honey," The outfit doesn't sound too appealing. I wouldn't know how to wrap it. And I'm sure we would run out of honey long before we got through all that many locusts. "He proclaimed, "There cometh one mightier than I am after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose." Now here is the exciting part: "I indeed have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

We understand from the girdle of skins and the locusts that John is a wild man. His words must be important enough to have solidified his place in history, because his social skills certainly were not. We can understand from the latchet remark, the thong of the sandals that is, that John considers himself much less important than the one he is announcing. But what about calling everybody vipers, and threatening them with the cutting axe and the winnowing fork? What did it have to do with John's current situation, as a thoroughly oppressed Israelite under Roman rule? More importantly, what might it have to do with our current situation this Advent, 2021? The pruning axe, the refining fire and the winnowing fork, they are serious warnings. Through the centuries, these words have been used to scare the h-e- double hockey sticks out of people. But often the words have just served to confuse the heck out of us instead: "Woe be unto you!" Woe be unto whom? Non-Christians? Lapsed Christians? Imperfect Christians? Sinners? Woe be unto everybody? We want to live as Christians, which means we must learn to live with our imperfections even while we ask for God's help in addressing them.

John the prophetic preacher is talking about what God wants to do for us, not to us. John is talking, ok he's shouting, to a rural people, an agricultural people, farmers, herders, craftspeople, in rural, agricultural language. If you've ever grown fruit trees or roses, you know that sometimes you have to prune -- radically, to keep the trees

productive. But the goal is fruit and flowers, not cordwood. If you've ever burned off a field, you know it's a dicey business, but it sure helps next year's yield. If you've ever tried to eat a grain of wheat, you know there's a husk you have to get rid of before you can use the kernel, and the purpose of the winnowing fork, tossing wheat into the breeze over the threshing room floor, the purpose is bread, not chaff. These are not threats, these are vivid images of God's present and future activity. God will support the human race and each of us by demanding that we seek to be our best selves. And God will insist on helping us to whatever degree we will acquiesce. Knowing how much we need help - we needn't try to avoid or deny it -- will help us produce our fruit, refresh our fields, and make our daily bread. God will help us prune ourselves, burn off our deadness, cast our husks to the wind. All we have to do is cooperate. Far from being a threat, this prophecy is what's good news. The mark of a Christian is to always be looking forward to a new world, to constantly pose critical questions to the society we live in, with a view towards conversion for ourselves and for the world, to stay unsatisfied with the status quo and keep saying that a new world is yet to come.

God cannot be moved by lip service alone, when transformative action does not accompany our glowing words. As they say in the world of addiction recovery, "If you want to stop drinking, you have to stop drinking." God is not interested in what our ancestors did well or poorly. As David Duplessis observes, "God has no grandchildren." What then must we do? The answer is clear: remember compassion for all who are less fortunate – in whatever ways – than ourselves. Those of us who have more than we need are to provide for those who have less. The businesspeople must think of the common good before their own profit. Those with power must stop using their power to control and oppress the disenfranchised and the poor. This was true then. It is true now. We have not been promised a life free of difficulty, discomfort and sorrow; we have been promised a life in which joy will have the last word. But we are obligated to turn towards this life in our thoughts, our words, and especially in our deeds.

John's baptism makes us declare our desire and intention: "I want to bear fruit," "I want to raise food," "I want to make bread." But this other baptism – the one with fire -- will give us the power we need to

do these things. Consider John to be a warming fire, encouraging us from outside ourselves, “John the heat lamp,” so to speak. His baptism results in our declaration: “We confess how we have fallen short. We want to try to do better, and stop trying to justify our mistakes.” But this new baptism warms us from within, producing a conviction, a certain knowledge that we really can get up and prune away whatever is dead in us. We can winnow out the insidious bigotries that keep us divided. We can burn away the wretched arrogance that has so many of us demanding our own personal choices while depriving others of theirs. We can do whatever it takes to break the wholesale addiction to whatever is keeping our people enslaved, whether it be greed, gunpowder or gin.

It is only the Holy Spirit of God, the grace of goodness poured onto and coursing through each of us that works as an antidote to our fears of being less-than, of being deprived, of being seen as insignificant. The Spirit is the only catalyst for the chain reaction we need to change our lives. Otherwise, our fears will propel us to do unto others before they do unto us, in ways that would have obviated our very existence if they had been done unto us, or our parents, or their parents’ parents as immigrants, as strangers in this glorious, troubled country of ours.

It’s microwave theology: heating us up from the inside out. Of course, cooperating with all that power means doing what is required of us by the Word of God: risky sharing, justice, fairness, compromise, discomfort and change. As the psalmist says, “Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord.” Do the right thing, and let go of the consequences. How can someone tell that I’m a Christian? Is it by the words I say, or the look on my face? Or is it by the deep heating within me that makes me determined and sometimes even able to love mercy and walk humbly?

Are we vipers? That is one question we each decide for ourselves. Some days, we’re slithering around with our squirmy cousins under big flat rocks, saying things like “We must register the ones we fear; get them under control, they’re what’s wrong with this country.” Not far down that road are the destinations Ostracism and Expulsion. Eventually you get to the town of Plain Killing. There are vipers among us, and sitting idly by while they make decisions for us just won’t do.

When they slither out and start biting; their bites can kill dreams and relationships, can even take lives, perpetuating the very cycles of violence they promise to break.

But some days, we good snakes mind our business, cruising around through the grass, expanding opportunities for all, caring for the disenfranchised, basking on the tops of rocks when it's sunny, taking care of our serious problems by facing our failures and difficulties with creative determination, reality checking and broad cooperation. If necessary, by declaring holy war on guns, not people. Do we really think that if guns and ammunition were as hard to come by as credentials from the DMV, we'd have the same level of violence?

Let's get real. It won't kill us to change, it will save us. All over the world, including here at home, the spread of modernity and the wearing down of tradition have led to a frantic fantasy: to repossess the past. However these acts of reclamation, through ever more severe adherence to texts without context, do not restore what was lost. They create new and warped and horribly dangerous new patterns, that we have to then stop and deal with. God's very self is dying to help us sort out the furious from the formative each day. He's coming again in a week or so to show us the way. She's here with us now, and will see that we succeed, if only we will call upon her name.

The Prayers of the People

I ask your prayers for God's people throughout the world; for this gathering; and for all ministers and people. Pray for the Church.
Silence

I ask your prayers for peace; for goodwill among nations; and for the well-being of all people. Pray for justice and peace. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all those in need of healing and strength, especially the family and friends of Nöelle Valentine. Pray for the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed, and those in prison and all those in any need or trouble. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or deeper self-knowledge and faith . Pray that they may find and be found by Christ. *Silence*

I ask your prayers for the departed, especially Nöelle and others we name now, silently or aloud_____. Pray for those who have died.
Silence

I ask your prayers of thanksgiving for the blessings of this life, especially those we name now, silently or aloud_____ *Silence*

Praise God for those in every generation in whom Christ has been honoured. Pray that we may have grace to glorify Christ in our own day by ordering our lives according to his Word. Amen.

Collect of the Day

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. ***Amen.***

The Confession

Almighty and most merciful God, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto humankind in Christ Jesus our Lord; and grant, O most merciful God, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

Now may the One who loved the world enough to send the first and only child to live among us in great humility, open your eyes to look for the day when that child comes again. And thus, the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer be with you today and remain with you always. ***Amen.***

Hymn 73 The King shall come when morning dawns

The King shall come when morning dawns and light triumphant breaks;
When beauty gilds the eastern hills and life to joy awakes.

Not, as of old, a little child, to bear, and fight, and die,
But crowned with glory like the sun that lights the morning sky.

The King shall come when morning dawns and earth's dark night is past;
O haste the rising of that morn, the day that e'er shall last;

And let the endless bliss begin, by weary saints foretold,
When right shall triumph over wrong, and truth shall be extolled.

The King shall come when morning dawns and light and beauty brings:
Hail, Christ the Lord! Thy people pray, come quickly, King of kings.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEe5f61400M>

The Lost Lagoon

It is dusk on the Lost Lagoon,
And we two dreaming the dusk away,
Beneath the drift of a twilight grey—
Beneath the drowse of an ending day
And the curve of a golden moon.

It is dark on the Lost Lagoon,
And gone are the depths of haunting blue,
The grouping gulls, and the old canoe,
The singing firs, and the dusk and—you,
And gone is the golden moon.

O lure of the Lost Lagoon—
I dream to-night that my paddle blurs
The purple shade where the seaweed stirs—
I hear the call of the singing firs
In the hush of the golden moon.

Emily Pauline Johnson