

The Sunday Missive -- December 15, 2024

The Third Sunday in Advent

61 Sleepers Wake

“Sleepers, wake!” A voice astounds us,
The shout of rampart guards surrounds us:
“Awake, Jerusalem, arise!”
Midnight’s peace their cry has broken,
Their urgent summons clearly spoken:
“The time has come, O maidens wise! Rise up, and give us light;
The Bridegroom is in sight. Alleluia! Your lamps prepare
And hasten there, that you the wedding feast may share.”

Lamb of God, the heavens adore you;
Let saints and angels sing before you,
As harps and cymbals swell the sound.
Twelve great pearls, the city’s portals:
Through them we stream to join the immortals
As we with joy your throne surround.
No eye has known the sight, no ear heard such delight:
Alleluia! Therefore we sing to greet our King;
Forever let our praises ring.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0H2sCW13U>

Hymn 56 O come, O come Emmanuel Verses 5 & 6

O come, O Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home.
Make safe for us the heavenward road and bar the way to death's abode.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

O come thou Dayspring from on high and cheer us by thy drawing nigh
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadow put to flight

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

The 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 forever. Amen.

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 God and not be afraid.***

For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense* ***Who alone 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 the deeds of the Lord 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 4:4-7

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.

Hymn 57 Lo! He comes with clouds descending

Lo! he comes with clouds descending, once for our salvation slain;
Thousand, thousand saints attending swell the triumph of his train:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ the Lord returns to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him, robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him, pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.

Those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears,
Cause of endless exultation to his ransomed worshipers;
With what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture,
Gaze we on those glorious scars!

Yea, amen! let all adore thee, high on thine eternal throne;
Savior, take the power and glory; claim the kingdom for thine own:
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou shalt reign, and thou alone.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w98-VuKi-4Q>

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 Christmas. What is John the Baptist doing, and why are we talking about it now? Well, 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.'" 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 such talk 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, 2024? 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 – literally. 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?

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, you know you have to prune them, sometimes radically, to keep the trees productive. But the goal is fruit, not cordwood. If you've ever burned off a field, you know it can be 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, 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 by demanding that we seek to be our best selves. And God will help us, will insist on helping us -- knowing how much we need help -- produce our fruit, refresh our fields, and make our daily bread. God will help us prune our lives, 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 good news. As Henri Nouwen observed, 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 insisting that a new world is yet to come.

God cannot be moved by lip service alone, as when transformative action does not accompany our glowing words. God is not interested in what our ancestors did well or poorly. As David Duplessis wisely 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. The police must stop using their power to control, oppress and exploit the poor and marginalized. 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: "I want to bear fruit, I want to raise food, I want to make bread." But this other baptism will give us the power we need to do it. 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 not continue 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 the stunning injustices. 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 violence that is keeping our people enslaved -- to the greatest and worst human invention of all, the gun.

It is the Holy Spirit of God, the grace of goodness poured onto and coursing through each of us that is the only antidote to such fear-based bondage. The Spirit is the only catalyst for the chain reaction we need. Otherwise, our fears will propel us to do unto others in ways that would have preempted 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 suffering. 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 able and determined to love mercy and walk humbly?

Are we vipers? Yes and no. Some days, we’re slithering around with our squirmy serpentine cousins under big flat rocks, saying things like “We’ve gotta register them; get them under control: all Negroes or Germans or Irish or Asians, all Muslims; all Latin Americans. Or, better yet, deport them. They’re what’s wrong with this country.” Not far down that road are the destination cities of Ostracism and Expulsion. Eventually you get to the town of Plain Killing. There are vipers among us, in prominent positions. And sitting idly by while they make decisions for us just won’t do. When they slither out and start biting; their bites will kill dreams and relationships, will even take lives, perpetuating the very cycles of violence they promise to

end. But some days, we good snakes mind our business, 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 and broad cooperation. If necessary, by declaring holy war on guns, not on people. Do we really think that if guns were as hard to obtain and deal with as 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 will have to arrest 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 two to show us the way. She's here with us now, and will see that we succeed, if only we will call her name.

Hymn 66 Come, thou long expected Jesus

Come, thou long-expected Jesus born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art:
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a king,
Born to reign in us for ever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit, raise us to thy glorious throne.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_R9vm8T3Vw

Nature

Full of rebellion, I would die,
Or fight, or travel, or deny
That thou hast ought to do with me.

 O tame my heart;
 It is thy highest art
To captivate strong holds to thee.

If thou shalt let this venom lurk,
And in suggestions fume and work,
My soul will turn to bubbles straight,

 And thence by kinde
 Vanish into a winde,
Making thy workmanship deceit.

O smooth my rugged heart, and there
Engrave thy rev'rend law and fear;
Or make a new one, since the old

 Is sapless grown,
 And a much fitter stone
To hide my dust, then thee to hold.

George Herbert