

The Second Sunday in Advent ~ Year A
December 9, 2007
The Reverend Amy Morehous

“Repentance ~ Living In A State of Change”

“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.” I’ve always marveled at how sure John sounds, how full of fire! I think I prefer the John of next week’s Gospel – which finds John in a completely different place – next week we’ll hear John in prison, sending a plaintive question to Jesus, sounding much less sure of himself, asking “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus’ response to him is the exciting news – the wonderful, amazing news – that he is the advent of everything we live in hope for. But that’s next week.

This week we are wrestling with John, and with his call to repentance. Advent and Lent are times of examination – of evaluation. It’s a time to look at our lives, and see how we’re living into what we believe, or even IF we believe. It’s not an easy task, is it? Wouldn’t it be much easier to just skip it? Wouldn’t we all rather look ahead to the joy of Christmas, immerse ourselves in the happiness of the holiday, in the wonder we see on our children’s faces, and just forget John, and the discomfort he brings us every year? After all, I’ve always thought that the prophets would make lousy party guests. Try to image John at your next Christmas party, all wild-haired, and fiery-eyed, smelling of camels, waving around his locusts and wild honey, haranguing all your work colleagues about being burned with ‘unquenchable fire’? Doesn’t sound very appealing, does it?

But before we shove him into the closet for another year, with an “Oh, do be quiet, for goodness sake, before you scare someone,” - before we ourselves toss John into jail to await his fate, maybe we should listen to what he has to say.

He tells us to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He also tells us that we need to do this because a new thing is coming, something powerful, something mighty – something we need to prepare ourselves for. The people of Jerusalem and Judea believe him and have come in droves to be baptized, to say “I believe that a new thing is coming, is just around the corner. I believe, and I repent...baptize me and make me a part of that new kingdom.” Then John says something else of importance, this time to the Sadducees who have come to see him – He says “Do not presume.”

Do not presume that your status as children of Abraham makes you better than anyone else. Do not presume to ignore your relationship with God and each other. Do not presume that your own efforts or money or prestige or social standing will make you important in the eyes of God. Do not presume to live only in the past while ignoring the future.

Each of you sitting here today is an important and valued child of the promise – the promise of new life and new beginnings, the promise that John foretells. As children of the promise, we are more than the sum of our bank accounts, or the variety of our talents. We aren't working our way into God's graces with our good deeds, or winning God over with the brilliance of our achievements. We are important to God because we are the children of the living God – we are, all of us, living into something new...something life-changing.

After all, that's what repentance is – a state of change. To change one's mind, or change one's ways. Repentance is not static, and it certainly isn't simple – it's turning around, and looking forward to the future. Frederick Buechner, in his book *Wishful Thinking*, defines repentance this way: "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'" It seems to me that John the Baptist is looking at the future, expecting the "more powerful one," and saying "WOW." (pg 79)

We've all been living into that change this year – living into a new way of doing things, a new way of looking at our ministry, a new way of looking at who we are as the people of God. Have you had it this year, that powerful sense of "WOW"? This year, the 50th anniversary of Ascension, has been a singular year, in many ways. If you were here at this time last year – did you look ahead with hope – did you envision the wild ride that the Holy Spirit had planned for us?

I'm not sure I knew what to expect - it has certainly been a year of change and redefinitions for me. Today is the first anniversary of my ordination. Last year, on December 9th, I stood before the altar here – (at almost exactly this time), and I vowed to do all I was called upon to do as a deacon. I recently reread my ordination vows, and I found myself taking a mental inventory – evaluating how I myself have lived into the promises I made to God and to the Episcopal Church. Thankfully, I'm willing to be a work in progress – willing to look at my ministry, and see where I need a new way of looking at things, where I need to listen to the Holy Spirit's leading, where I need to learn more so that I can be a more effective servant of God.

When you hear John's strident call to repentance – when you shift uncomfortably in your seat – perhaps you should listen to him, and to the tug that might come at your heart. John comes among us today to ask if we are ready to receive the miraculous gift prepared for us – that new, powerful, and mysterious thing. He asks us if we have left room for Christ, here amidst the chaos and clutter of our daily lives. He asks us to evaluate our lives against God's standards, and not those of the world. He asks us if we have lived in community and harmony with each other, if we have helped the helpless, if we have been people of hope and faith, even when times were difficult.

In a few minutes, we will all stand up as a community of believers and renew our bap-

tismal vows, just as we did on this Sunday last year. We did it then to commit ourselves to 50 hours of community service in honor of the 50th anniversary of Ascension. Today, we do it in thanksgiving for that service, and in joyful anticipation of the coming of Christ. We repeat these vows, and we examine our hearts this Advent – we look to see if we have indeed given Christ enough space to call home.

Afterward, we will collect any remaining volunteer hours with the offering – and we will lift them all up – all the offerings of our time and talents, of those things we have been fortunate enough to receive from a gracious God. Many of you here have been generous with your time, and with your gifts, both here and in the community and we thank you. I especially hope this has been a year that you stretched yourself in some way – that you looked at something in a new light, that you considered a new idea, tried something you'd never done before, or listened to a new way of doing something. If you didn't, maybe you can consider that for the new year ahead. I know that you will all continue in your service – I hope that you all will continue to make lives brighter, and hopes stronger for your Ascension family, and for people all across our community.

I look forward to more chances to serve and grow together as a community in the coming year. As I spent my time looking back on my rookie year, I realize that I'm definitely ready to look forward to the WOW still to come. And, in the words of Paul:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

WOW!

Amen

Notes:

Repentance means to assume responsibility for the future and not to be tied to the past and to personal prerogatives. "Do not presume" upon your status as children of Abraham, John says. God is able to raise up new children (9). The key focus is on God's ability and the promise of God's power. Repentance and judgment are serious business, but one does not force fruit. Fruit springs forth out of a new orientation, out of knowing one's place as a child of God's promise. In baptism's call to such response as God's children, we experience the transforming power that links "being" (children of God) and "doing" (bearing fruit), between "faith" and "action." Matthew will hold this wholeness before us throughout the gospel. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world" (5:13-14). "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them." (7:24).

Hope for such wholeness is finally secured in the promise of the one who is coming. When John claims that God is able to raise up children, this is clearly a promissory announcement of the power of God that will indeed "raise up" a child whose resurrection will be life and salvation for us.

So we return to the preacher and the preacher's imagination and dreams. What is your vision? What is your hope? Do you dwell in the past and in recrimination or despair about what might be? Or do you live into that future where all that is named by the name of God and God's kingdom is located. Will you move into this Advent season in hope and in the sure confidence that fruit is yet to come, that God will yet do a new thing among us? Promises are always a matter of hope. And to hear God's promise again in this "one who is coming" is to be called to repentance and so empowered to rethink, to re-imagine, and to reorder our lives by the power of God's presence.

What is repenting? Literally the Greek (metanoeo) means, "to change one's mind." However, given Matthew's emphasis on "bearing fruit," his idea of "repentance" probably goes back to the Hebrew shuv -- "to change one's ways." It involves more than just thinking in a different way. Stoffregen

In the Christian New Testament, the word "repentance" carries this meaning, and one more. The roots of the Greek word for "repentance" mean "to go beyond the mind that you have." Borg

-So apology and repentance, forgiveness and repentance, are quite different. Apology and forgiveness do not in themselves imply change. Repentance does. Borg

Frederick Buechner in his book titled "Wishful Thinking" p.79 defines repentance this way. "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying 'Wow!.'" It seems to me that John the Baptist is looking at the future, expecting the "more powerful one," and saying "WOW."

We shall have to repent, not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked , but for the appalling silence of the good people. M. L. King Jr.