

“Prepare the Way to your Heart”

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Now that is the way to get people into a Christmas mood. Why do you think that we have to hear from John the Baptizer in this Advent season? According to the Gospels John is the first to herald the coming of the Messiah in his time. To the people of his time and even moreso to ours John is a mess. He wears clothes that are odd to us, but if we know the signs they mark him as a prophet of old. He lives on honey and the fruit of the locust tree (carob not insects; although insects inspire additional weirdness), because as a Nazirite¹ he must live by certain strict rules some of which are dietary. He comes to the people of Judah preaching repentance of sins and offering baptism as a symbol of the washing away of their sins.

As I pointed out last week, we start the season of Advent looking not so much at the coming of the baby Jesus as the first coming but at the return of Christ in power and glory as the second coming. It may seem like putting the cart before the horse, but even as we anticipate the birth of Jesus we who live in these latter days are also anticipating the Second Coming, something Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the Magi knew nothing about.

This week John is preparing the people of Judea for the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. He preaches foreboding sermons that would surely scare people into repenting and being baptized in the Jordan River. His preaching was so powerful that he even attracted Pharisees and Sadducees to the river to be baptized. He was no easier on them than he was on the common folk for he called these holy men a “brood of vipers.”

Isaiah also speaks words of prophecy about the coming Messiah in the scripture we heard this morning. Isaiah is more gentle and hopeful in his words. He first mentions that a shoot will come out of the root of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David, the most revered king of Israel. Thus the savior will come from David’s lineage and therefore would be born in Bethlehem the birthplace of David.

Furthermore, the spirit of God will rest upon this shoot. He will have wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the awe of the Lord. This shoot from Jesse will not judge people by their looks or by gossip. He will be guided by righteousness when he looks upon the meek and poor. Yet he will also kill wickedness.

What’s more Isaiah goes on to describe what in more recent times has been called “The Peaceable Kingdom.” This description inspired many artists

¹ Nazirites were men whose lives were dedicated to God from childhood. There were many rules to live by including diet and not cutting their hair. Samson was a Nazirite, although not a very faithful one, thus the importance of his hair in his story in the Book of Judges. For more on Nazirites see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazirite>

most particularly Early American artist Edward Hicks who painted numerous versions of it. .

Isaiah's vision is not one of doom and gloom. He sees a new world where the "wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox."

Our forebears read the little child as Jesus who was born in humility, laid in a stone feeding trough after being born in a barn surrounded by animals. The animals look on in wonder at this most normal thing, the birth of a child. Yet, somehow they know that this child is truly special.

Even with the outcome being a peaceable kingdom we cannot overlook that the wicked are killed. But because we all have aspects of sin and wickedness within us, I believe that it is that wickedness which is purged from our hearts so that we may join in that new era of peace, justice and truth. It is the little child within our hearts who joins with the Christ child to lead our world out of darkness into light and life and joy.

It is the love of God for each of us that inspires my hope in this new world that Isaiah speaks of and Hicks paints. A world that comes when we can recognize our failings, give them over to God, and give ourselves over to that little child whose birth and rebirth is but a few weeks hence; a birth that we are once again preparing our hearts to receive.

