

Clothed For Kingdom Work

Mark 1:1-8

December 7, 2008

Advent is the season during which we are supposed to warm up – prepare our hearts, minds, and homes for the birth of the Christ child. Watching a few basketball games this week caused me to think about the similarity between advent and the warm-up time prior to a game. There's a kind of repetition of certain behaviors related to the game that basketball players perform/practice before the game. It's to remind their muscles and nerves how they are supposed to act during the game.

Another purpose of the warm-up time prior to a game is to get the adrenaline flowing – to psyche one's self up emotionally, intellectually, physically, and yes, spiritually. One of my fondest memories of my own basketball playing days was the warm-up time before the game – the being energized by my teammates and the crowd – the focusing my energy on the task ahead – the, in a sense, preparing myself to do something - hoping to be able to do something – better than I had ever been able to do it before.

At least one of the understandings of the role of John the Baptist is that he was the warm-up act. His role was to get the people ready to hear Jesus – to see Jesus – to experience Jesus. We yearly rehearse John the Baptist's words and role as we prepare for Christ being born in us anew because we anticipate the experience ahead of us to be something more meaningful than any other time we have ever experienced it before.

The way the writer of the Gospel of Mark sets the stage for Christ's life and death is a bit different than the other gospels. There's no mention of the nativity scene – no Mary and Joseph and a trip to Bethlehem. Instead the editor includes a story at the very beginning having to do with the ancient words of Isaiah and this eccentric guy out in the wilderness.

“John the Baptist is like that eccentric uncle who visits every year around Christmas. But he's worse than eccentric. He can be downright scary. This man is no Dale Carnegie course graduate. He's never in the crèche set. He's never invited to be in the Christmas pageant. There are no Christmas carols or ornaments for John the Baptist. Yet year after year, John reappears in Advent, and century after century his message to the church and to us is always, ‘REPENT!’ Ready or not, here he comes!”¹

Bible scholars and preachers down through the ages have tried to make sure we understand that John was a little strange. He has been referred to as a kook, an eccentric, a flake, an oddball, and a wildman. He's been described as unkempt, weird, smelly, and hippie-like. The point of all of those who've chosen to take a stab at portraying John the Baptist is that he wasn't a guy with very impressive credentials. And yet, every one of the Gospel writers thought him important enough to reference him in their work. Say what we might about him – think what we want about him – the role he had to play was so important the bible historians chose to be honest about who he was and what he had to say and thus we must also if we're going to be prepared for Christ's coming into our lives and world this year.

Now, one of the reasons I think it's important to pay attention to him is because I think it's significant that God chose to use a guy like him. I mean, I think it says a lot about God and God's attitude toward all of us. The significance of God using someone like John the Baptist – someone dressed in clothing made of camel's hair with a belt made of leather around his waist – the significance of God using someone like John to prepare the way for the Savior of the world is that it says to us that God comes into history – that God comes into the

world – that God comes into our lives in unexpected ways, through unexpected people and in unexpected places.

The Christian journey involves getting used to expecting the unexpected – getting used to God using people like us to prepare the way for others in the most unexpected place in our lives – getting used to God putting in our paths people to whom we must minister, speak, help, thus preparing them to hear the good news about the meaning of Jesus Christ’s coming. The Christian journey of faith involves expecting the unexpected in our lives and around us.

Now, besides noticing this unspoken message from God in the story of John the Baptist, we also need to pause and really hear what he said and did. John was pretty blunt about his message. He was concerned about what it takes to be in relationship with God. As far as John was concerned, it wasn’t about trying harder to be more devout or to do more good works. John’s message was not that we have to do a bunch of things in order to be worthy of God’s love.

“No,” said John, says John, “No, it’s simply about our admitting our human condition, our situation, our reality and deciding to make some changes. It’s about repenting of our wrongdoing, our sinfulness and accepting God’s forgiveness.” Advent is about preparing ourselves for the coming of God into the world by our being penitent.

The message of John the Baptist was the beginning of the good news. New life, salvation, is possible through Jesus Christ. The unexpected message is that we prepare to hear the good news – to experience the good news – when we are honest with ourselves and with God about our real selves – the real stuff going on inside us – our disappointments about our own behavior and attitudes and thoughts. The unexpected message is that if we want to feel better about ourselves, get well emotionally, psychologically, relationally, and yes, even in some ways physically, then we need to repent – we need to admit our need to be forgiven.

One of the most popular secular stories we delight in hearing year after year is Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. We seem never to tire of hearing about miserly old Scrooge – the way he clutched onto his money, failed to provide a living wage to his employees, his lack of love, kindness, warmth, friendship. We are intrigued with the vision he has in a dream of his past and present and his fright at getting a glimpse of his future which caused him to make some rather dramatic changes in his life. The once cold and indifferent to people Scrooge, becomes generous and compassionate.

It’s indeed a heart-warming story. But, it is more than that. It is also a story full of hope because it creates within us a sense that we too can make needed changes in our lives. “We can break free from the ruts we have burrowed, and the negative behaviors we have cultivated. We can become kind and compassionate, humble and hospitable, joyful and generous.”²

While Dickens may not have had the story of John the Baptist in mind when he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, there’s no question it’s message is gleaned from the same understanding – that it takes facing one’s self – coming to grips with one’s mistakes, sins, wrong attitudes or actions it takes repentance.

When Jesus Christ enters the picture – when the message of Jesus Christ is brought to bear on situations around us, unexpected things happen. When we repent of the anger in us – when we repent of the selfish thoughts in our hearts and minds – when we repent of the prideful way we think of ourselves as better than

others – when we repent of our jealousies – when we repent of our racially motivated actions – the good news begins to have its way in us. The good news about the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and the grace of God can pour into us and we can have new life – life abundant – life eternal.

Advent is about preparing for the coming of Jesus Christ – the becoming aware again of the presence of Jesus Christ in us. We prepare for that experience – we get ourselves clothed for that experience, for kingdom work – by repenting of our sins, admitting our sins – owning up to our human condition. And when we prepare in this way – when we warm-up for the game of life by repenting – we should expect the unexpected to happen in us, through us, and around us.

One of the ways we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives is the sacrament of Holy Communion. This meal is an experience of God’s grace – a reminder that God’s grace is freely offered to all who desire it. This is an open table – all who desire the grace this meal provides is invited to partake. You do not need to be a member of this church. You do not have to be a member of any church in order to receive the grace it offers.

I invite you to first turn with me to page 12 as we pray together a prayer of confession.

Now I invite you to turn to page 15 where you will find your responses during the great thanksgiving.

1. Emphasis, November/December, 2005 (Lima, Ohio), p. 39.
2. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones, “An Alternative Future,” www.esermons.com.