

**Advent 1B**  
**Dec. 4, 2011**  
**The Rev. Nigel Taber-Hamilton**

A group of us were in Seattle last night – at St. Mark’s Cathedral – to support an organization called FAN: The Faith Action Network. Disclaimer: I’m an executive board member of FAN. The Faith Action Network’s mission is “to be a faith-inspired statewide partnership striving for a just, compassionate, and sustainable world through community building, education, and courageous public action.” We heard Rick Steves – yes, the travel guru – who described himself as a “good Lutheran boy” talk to us for 30 minutes about the responsibility all people of faith share to act to address the world’s inequalities – it was a powerful example of what FAN is about: advocating for social justice. in Old Testament language, caring for widows and orphans, welcoming aliens and strangers. And it was a great way to focus on our journey through Advent - a reflection of what we’re called by our faith to be and do.

Driving back, I noticed that even though we think we’re in Advent many folk think Christmas is here. There’s a disconnect along the lines of that familiar phrase “Eh, Houston, we have a problem”!

We might think – smugly – that we get Advent and Christmas, that it’s only those others with their decorations up who’ve missed the point. But actually, the problem is the same for all of us. We’re so saturated with the cocaine of Christmas commercialism that it’s impossible not to be intoxicated by it. As much as we might try and pretend otherwise we, too, let The Story about the Baby take over Advent. We know about what scholars call “The Birth Narratives” – and just in case you’re not familiar with them Tom Johnson will be talking about them for the next three weeks.

On the surface there are no shocks in this story, in this Birth Narrative – we all know pretty much what to expect. Angels, shepherds, a crib under a star: “Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Glory to the New Born King”.

And when we’ve celebrated the birth of the Baby our world will return to normal until next Christmas.

Except.

Except today’s readings don’t allow it! There’s this really odd, hairy man coming at us from the desert. What’s that about? And where’s the “real” story – you know, that one I just described with angels and shepherds and mangers? This guy needs to get with the program! But he’s skipped right by it (as much as John the Baptism could skip!) and he’s going on about baptism and the Holy Spirit. What happened to that cute little baby.....?

Isaiah seems – at first! – to be different. The mood’s right: “comfort...tender[ness].....” forgiveness.

But wait! There’s more! Not only do you get this comfort and tenderness, you get the desert too!

Or, rather, it's the other way round. The truth is, Isaiah says, we get to the comfort only when we've faced the devastation.

And we're in that devastation, that desert by choice – so says Isaiah, anyway. We're in the desert because that's what we've made of our lives – we pulled up our roots, and moved away from the living water that is God and now we're just so dried up that we're weak and purposeless. We've allowed our world to be devastated. Most of our world – and I mean the whole planet, not this cosy part of it – most of our world doesn't have clean, safe drinking water. Half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day. A child dies unnecessarily from malnutrition somewhere in the world every six seconds. Since I began my sermon somewhere around 75 children have just died. Most of them didn't even have a manger..... The infant mortality rate in the USA is at the bottom of the western democracies: nearly three times that of Sweden, double that of France, a third higher than the UK. Fully one fifth of our children here in this country live in poverty.

This is our devastation: Isaiah got it right.

Isaiah's story is just as much a "birth narrative" as those in Matthew and Luke. It just doesn't have the Baby that we can all coo over and then get on with our party. "Instead, God is like a breath of fire on the dried grass of our lives" (Jane Williams). When God breathes on us, all that is left is wilderness and God.

And this is The Moment, this instant when we finally recognize that there's no life in us. This is The Moment when the transformation of the desert can begin.

All of a sudden in this wilderness of our own making, this wasteland, there are paths, there are heralds, there's shouting and great crowds, and much joy at the coming of the great Monarch – so unlike the Powers and Principalities that usually rule. And everywhere this Monarch goes life springs up. Water in the desert! A highway for our God. Real comfort and tenderness.....but only with God.

The birth that comes at the end of Advent is not the end. It's the beginning. When we truly grasp the heart of this story we figure out that the Coming is not the time to pack things away until next year.

Whoever wrote the second Letter of Peter got this! Be grateful for where you are in your wilderness because now you know what has to change. Now is the time to start building.

Now is the time to start advocating for justice, building for justice.

So what about this strange, hairy man? In a very profound sense, we miss the point of Mark's words if we place ourselves in the position of onlookers, hearing John's cry as "once-for-all". If the voice crying in the wilderness cried but once, our faith is already dead. The baton has been passed to us. We need now to be that voice crying in the wilderness, in our wildernesses, crying out for justice, crying out for peace, crying out for comfort, crying out for consolation; crying out for all of those things for the lost and the lonely, the widow and the orphan, for the children who continue to die of malnutrition, who continue to live in poverty, who continue to suffer.

It is up to us, now to see Advent for what it really is: it is for us, again, to make the way ready for God; to make straight the crooked pathways starting with ourselves.

Because if we were not to lift a finger to prepare again the world for god's coming, just exactly what would that say about us?