

The Second Sunday of Advent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 12.06.20
Isaiah 40: 1-11, Psalm 85: 102, 8-13, 2 Peter 3: 8-15, Mark 1: 1-8

John the Baptist did not quite “fit in”. I mean camel skins for clothing and a diet of locusts and wild honey. Bugs and sticky honey combs. Messy is the only word for it. Messy, and not only in clothing and diet. John’s message was in a word messy. Repent! No one really likes to be told they have sins to repent. Messy. And yet people came out from the populated areas into the desert to hear him castigate them for the way they lived. A long, dusty, hot walk to hear someone tell them that they were sinners, that they needed to repent. What was the attraction? He wasn’t talking only to those other folks either, to those who were low born or poor. John was talking to everyone, priest and peasant, Pharisee as well as fisherman. Beggars and wealthy. In a very hierarchical society, John was leveling the playing field. Everyone was a sinner and everyone needed to repent and be washed clean of their sin.

Why was this good news? The answer leads us back to the prophets of an earlier time. Back to Isaiah, Malachi and the story of the Exodus.

So, what was the attraction, why did people of all classes and stations in life come such a difficult distance to hear this message of repentance and restoration. For that is what it was, a message of repentance and restoration, a new beginning, a new start. That was the attraction. Things were not working well as they were. Rome continued to be a harsh occupier, there was rebellion, cruelty and fear. People were looking desperately for an answer, something that would make their life better, and so they came pouring out of Jerusalem, down the dusty road on foot to the river Jordan.

They came because they saw in John a bridge, a way to get from the old life to the promise of something better, something that God offered and had in store for them. But before they could cross that bridge, they had to face the fact of sin in their lives and in the nation. They were not living as God had created them to live. Before the comfort promised by Isaiah came the necessary repentance required by John.

We often think of sin as those things which violate our understanding of the 10 commandments. Sin becomes actions that we do or the actions we fail to take. “Things done and left undone.” Or, we think of sin as those violations of societal norms, taboos that when we ignore them, result in punishment. Sin becomes something primarily about us. We can promise not to sin again but even as we promise it, we know in our hearts we will not be able to keep that promise.

Some years ago, fifty or so, I met a black man. Virgil, who was well into his seventies by then, had been born in the segregated South of the turn of the 20th century. He was raised in the Black Baptist church tradition of his day. That church practiced “believer” baptism. When someone reached the age of 13 or so, they were asked to make a profession of faith, promise to sin no more and then were baptized. The penalty for sin after baptism was eternal damnation and the fires of hell. Virgil, in relating his experience was honest. His words: “I was 13 just coming into the teen age years and they wanted me to say I would not sin again. I knew I could never keep that promise.”

Sin is sometimes thought of as self-deception. We see things the way we want them to be rather than as they are. We believe that we know best for the world, for those around us and

for ourselves. It is a form of the old adage “might makes right” and it is self-deceiving and it leads us into trouble.

Virgil’s struggle illustrates this way of viewing sin. Not so much as the things we do or fail to do, but as the idea that we are in control of all around us. The deception that with a little effort we can be perfect, without sin. Virgil was realistic, wise beyond his years. He knew that to promise to avoid sin for the rest of his life was an impossible task. And he also knew that the way out of the dilemma was to put God central in his life.

Sin is also often defined as “whatever separates us from God”. God is a God of perfection and good. For that reason whatever is not perfect and good in our lives separates us from God. If we believe that there is nothing that separates us, believe that we have no need of repentance, we are deceiving ourselves. And we are the ones, who deceiving ourselves, pay the penalty not of punishment but of estrangement from God.

Taking these two definitions together, sin can be seen as essentially the human inclination to delude ourselves about what is central to our lives. That delusion separates us from God. The consequences of such separation results in actions which are labeled “sinful”. In reality the actions so labeled are not the sins but the results of sin.

John the Baptist was calling the people of Judah and Jerusalem to repentance, to recognize their self-deception, to acknowledge how such self-deception distances them from God and God’s love. John was speaking to the people of his generation, but he might well be speaking to us across the centuries. In this way John is a kind of bridge, between what was experienced by the people in Palestine at the time of Jesus and what we are experiencing today. On one side of the bridge, where we stand, is sin, judgment and law, the bridge itself is the way of repentance, honestly looking at our lives, sorting out that which needs change and making the changes that we find necessary. When we arrive at the other side, we find grace, forgiveness and good news. We find the God of hope and peace, the God who has been waiting for us all along. The good news is that we can cross that bridge whenever we find it necessary. We can cross it whenever we are led by self-deception to ways that are not of God, whenever we acknowledge our need to recommit to the way of God, whenever we are in need of good news and the courage to change. Repentance is not a once in a lifetime crossing, but available to us whenever and however we need it.

The good news is that unlike what my friend Virgil was taught, sin is not a terminal condition. God is not only a God of judgment, calling us back to the way we are to live, but God is a God of forgiveness. When we respond to the call to come back, when we overcome our self-deception about our lives, we are repentant in the manner suggested by John the Baptist. That is the good news of comfort spoken by the Prophet Isaiah, it is the good news of Jesus Christ announced by John the Baptist. It is the good news of hope in the midst of despair and the good news of restoration in the midst of adversity that God offers us in this Advent time, 2020.