

Advent II, December 4, 2016 Nigel Taber-Hamilton. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland
Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13, Matthew 3:1-12

Advent. The word is middle-English, from the Latin *adventus* which means *arrival, approach*. So we're in the Season of Approach – both the approach of God in Jesus, and our approach to the remembering (in the sense of “making present again”) of Jesus' first “coming” in his birth at Christmastide.

Advent – approach – is also about the second coming of Jesus. Anyone know when? If you said “yes” then see me afterward! The truth from Jesus' own mouth is – you'll never know when until it actually happens! Still, though, Christians today have differing viewpoints on when, how, or even whether the second Advent will occur. But virtually all Christians believe that *God is dissatisfied with the world in its present state and seeks to increase love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance*.

Nowhere do we hear God saying, “Don't make me come down there!” What scripture calls for is what the realm of God requires: a change of heart, a contrite spirit, and a new set of values. What was that list again? *love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance*. Such a change is always initiated by the Spirit of God, but it's made real only through us – God insists that *we are the vehicles* for God's dream to be realized in the world.

That's where the energy comes from for John the Baptist.

But his words don't sound very much like the ones we hear from Isaiah – they're hardly gentle. It's a different way of approaching the future, isn't it?! He's so pumped up about the need for repentance that he's almost apoplectic. I think if he showed up today and acted the way he does in the gospels we'd have him locked up in a “secure facility”, doped up on anti-psychotic drugs! He's a wild figure, spewing picturesque images about the future, swearing at the wealthy and prominent folk who've come to have a “baptism experience” only because it's the “in” thing to do. Eugene Peterson's version of the bible - “The Message” - translates John's words to these self-important citizens like this: “What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It's your life that must change, not your skin!” (Peterson translation).

Here's the “voice crying in the wilderness.” If you were to go and read any of the 8th Century prophets – Amos, Hosea, Micah – you'd find similar language to John – he's really in that tradition stream. For John, his baptism only meant something when it was preceded by a change of heart and lifestyle.

No change in the world can happen unless there's a change in us. We will never be able to help increase love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance unless we change ourselves first, unless we come into a right relationship with God.

The good news is that we don't have to do this alone! We are “post-John” – after him. We journey with Jesus, who is our guide and our spiritual companion on the way. In Jesus we have

access to a deep spiritual relationship of common values and commitments

In Celtic spirituality there's a term for that deep relationship with any spiritual companion: *anam cara*. Our *anam cara* – our Spiritual Companion – our soul companion – mirrors our deepest self and enables us to embody the glory of God as persons “fully alive.” Our *anam cara* help us to awaken our awareness of our own nature and experience the joys of others. Our *Anam Cara* always accepts us as we truly are, holding us in beauty and light.

For the Celts, Jesus was the supreme *Anam Cara* – and they would tell us that he is for us, too. As one theologian of Celtic spirituality, John O'Donahue, has said: “...*You are joined in an ancient and eternal union with humanity that cuts across all barriers of time, convention, philosophy and definition. When you are blessed with an anam cara, the Irish believe, you have arrived at that most sacred place: home.*” Jesus is, for us, that home.

So where does that leave us with John the Baptist? John dreamed of the peaceable realm described by Isaiah and so do we. But you know the rest of his story. He never lived to see its full embodiment.

But John planted seeds that enabled Jesus to move forward as its messenger and embodiment. John is Advent personified: he embodies the fierce urgency of the now, but not yet. He is impatient with our foolishness and sin, and wants us to be better. As Advent messenger, he knows that salvation occurs through the transformation of one person at a time. This very moment is the right time for us to let go of the past, turn away from our half-heartedness and complicity with injustice, and find a new pathway to God's peaceable kingdom, one step and one breath at a time. We have Jesus as our *anam cara* who walks with us.

This Journey also reminds us that Advent is about more than personal transformation. We are the Advent change we seek; apart from us, there will be no peaceable realm. We must, therefore, continue John's work to *prepare the way of the Lord*, to prepare the way for Jesus' mission in our time that we may help inaugurate a time when we will see an increase love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance that comes about in part because we have committed to work for it ourselves, as vehicles of God's reign in this place.

Let us pray: God of the journey, creating, present, making us whole. We bless you for your abiding throughout our earthly pilgrimage. You walk with us through our wilderness, transform the darkness of our despair to brightest dawn, and throw open for us once more the light of day. As we seek to know you more deeply and to love you more fiercely encounter us in our silences, confront us in our wanderings, refine us in our becoming, and fit us to be soul friends to each other, to ourselves, and to all seekers and searchers after you. As we travel we pray that we may continue to do so with you beside us. We pray in your most holy name. Amen.