

Advent IIA

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Adrien Dawson, December 9, 2007

Gospel

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: `Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, `We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Be challenged, vulnerable, and changed for Advent

When I began the process to discern whether I had a call to ordination, the first thing a wise priest and mentor said to me was, "You need a spiritual director."

"A what?" I said, rather naively.

"I know just the person you need to visit. She is a priest in Baltimore, she has a storefront mission church in Pimlico."

First of all, I lived in Annapolis and I was not familiar with Baltimore. Second, I kind of remembered hearing about Pimlico on the news, and it wasn't good news. Third, the idea of engaging a spiritual director seemed daunting and dangerous.

So, I called up The Rev. Victoria Sirota and she gave me directions to Holy Nativity. She told me where to park. She told me what time to get there and that she would meet me at the front door.

On the day we were to meet, I left Annapolis very early for the journey; I did not want to be late. All the way to Pimlico I came up with at least 50 good reasons why I couldn't make it and would have to turn around and drive home. I was sure that Spiritual Direction would challenge me, make me vulnerable to the Holy Spirit, and change me forever. And I was not sure that I wanted all of that to happen in one day.

I got to Mother Vicky's church in the wilderness of Baltimore and discovered that I was about ½ hour early. I parked my car and got out feeling nervous and wanting to look natural. I stepped over used syringes and broken bottles. The drug dealers on the street corner watched me with a mixture of amusement and suspicion. A white girl with blond hair does not blend into with the

neighborhood. Once I reached the door, I discovered that Vicki was not there yet and I would have to wait, by myself, alone, in my car. I began to pray.

When she finally arrived, we walked into her small office, a closet really. We sat knee to knee and we prayed together with an intimacy that I had never experienced before, she held my hands cradled in hers. I shared my life stories of sorrow and wonder, I repented, I cried, I asked for God's help and forgiveness, and I emerged a different person. Every month, I went to see Mother Vicky and every month I was challenged, vulnerable, and changed.

When I read today's Gospel lesson, and I imagine the crowds coming to see John the Baptist at the river Jordan, I am reminded of my journey to spiritual direction. The crowds came from the civilized areas of Jerusalem, Judea, and the cities surrounding the Jordan River. John insisted that they leave their comfortable lives behind and journey to meet him in the wilderness, a dangerous place with lions and wolves and snakes. John proclaims a baptism of repentance, a challenging call to confess your sins and become vulnerable and washed clean in the waters of the Jordan. When people returned from their journey to see John in the wilderness, they would most certainly be changed and ready to receive the kingdom of heaven.

But then, John looks up from the river and sees a crowd of Pharisees and Sadducees coming towards him. They are traveling together, like a herd of holy men. They are not coming to be challenged and changed in the wilderness, they have come to check out this wild man who is causing such a stir among the people. They are not interested in repenting or becoming vulnerable, they are confident in the ancestry of Abraham.

John insults the holy men, "You brood of vipers!" John does not want to have anything to do with civilized faith. He isn't interested in becoming part of the institutional life of the synagogue and the temple. John wears camel's hair pelts and eats bugs and honey. He is not going to be invited home to anyone's dinner table. He is not going to reassure the powerful men of the cities that life will be business as usual. John challenges people to repent, change their lives, and bear good fruit. The only way people can respond to his message is if they travel to a place apart.

When I finally told Mother Vicky how much I feared driving to Pimlico she said to me, "Good. I wouldn't want you to travel some place comfortable for spiritual direction. I live a block from the diocesan center, but if we met there it would be too easy. You need to travel into the wilderness to meet God." It is hard to make yourself go to a strange place. We almost always need a person like John the Baptist or Mother Vicky to call us away from the world that we know and into a wild and scary place to meet God.

This is the kind of preparation that we are being called to embrace during the season of Advent. You may think Advent is a time to decorate your house, bake cookies and mail Christmas cards. But it is really a time to travel away into a wild place and be challenged, vulnerable, and changed by the forgiveness and love of God. Now, that does not mean that everyone needs to go visit a frightening street corner in Baltimore. But perhaps you might make some time to journey away from your regularly scheduled life and go into a wilderness place to pray. The wilderness can be any place that is not routine and homey for you. Maybe the wilderness is a park? Maybe it is a hospital, or a homeless shelter? Maybe the wilderness place is church? Maybe it is wild enough to simply carve out a corner of your house for prayer over the next few weeks. Being challenged, vulnerable, and changed is how we prepare the way of the Lord. It is how we make a straight path for Christ to come into our lives. When we journey with God to a place that is wild and unknown, we become vulnerable to God's presence. When our security blanket of

everyday routine is removed, then we can really see the difficult sins we need to confess and repent. All of this Advent time in the wilderness changes us to be able to receive the one who is coming to change the world.

I must warn you, though. Once we are changed, we can never go back to the way things were. Once we experience being vulnerable before God and we discover God's overwhelming love and forgiveness, we can never go back to our regularly scheduled lives. Advent is a one way trip. It is preparing us for the mystery of the incarnation of Christ in the baby Jesus and in the world today. As each week passes we know that the kingdom of heaven has come near to us, and we are ready for the One who is to come. We will be baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire, and there is no turning back.

Amen.