

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 11, 2005

What Are We Waiting For?

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

On Christmas Eve at Memorial Church I look forward to our 5:00 pm Family Service, which of course features, as you can imagine, plenty of children and chaos. It's our custom to give a children's sermon, and some of you may have witnessed the one I gave last year but most of you are likely hearing about it for the first time this morning. Yes, it is true that I rode my bicycle down the center aisle, right there, as a way of illustrating that I had been out searching for peace on earth. I managed to indulge myself, and others I hope, in a general mix of humor, fun, enlightenment and wit along with the help of Sponge Bob Square Pants and other assorted trinkets to convey a message to not only the children, but the hundreds of adults gathered as well. I had some good friends in attendance at that service who later told me that after the sermon two women seated behind them remarked: "She reminds me of Ellen DeGeneres."

Now Ellen happens to be one of my favorite celebrities, and while I was quite stunned and thought the comparison outrageous, I wouldn't be fully honest if I didn't admit I was somewhat flattered. Who wouldn't want to have a case of mistaken identity for Ellen DeGeneres? And I'm not altogether sure which part was the mistaken identity piece, the comedian, gay woman, or both, but it doesn't matter - I'm delighted with either attribute. But Ellen DeGeneres I am not.

Given the gospel reading we just heard, it's clear that not only is John the Baptist a key player in the Advent narrative, he also could be considered a celebrity in his own right who suffered from a case of mistaken identity. Are you the Messiah? Elijah? The prophet? Whatever we might think about him, we can surmise that he was quite charismatic as evidenced by the fact that people had been coming from miles around to hear him. Ordinary people. Scribes and Pharisees. While some would consider him odd (known to eat locusts and other things he could forage in the rough and dressed with camel's hair) as well as combative (he comes in anger and demand, threat and insistence to repent: in other words recognize the danger you're in and change) it might be easy to overlook the fact that John the Baptist was apparently an extraordinarily humble man. Not everyone would have been able to remain who they were in the face of such attention and notoriety. Some could start believing their own reputation or mistaken identity. Maybe I am the Messiah. Maybe I should run for that office.

But not John the Baptist. Further along in John's gospel narrative, there is a vivid illustration of his humility when he understands the diminishing of his own importance. The one who's coming I foretold has arrived now. I have done what I am supposed to do. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. He must increase, I must decrease. In the gospel narrative, John embodies the best and the last of the old tradition of Torah demand. One scholar describes him as having this deep sense of urgency about the world, one that is an urgency of threat and danger and jeopardy; one that we ourselves may sense now about the world. But when Jesus arrives on the scene, John immediately acknowledges the greatness of Jesus, greater than all that is past, greater than John

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 11, 2005

himself, greater than all ancient memories and hopes. He quickly and abruptly acknowledges his own unworthiness and declares that he must decrease and move off the stage of his monumental place in the course of religious history and give way to Jesus.

I have to admit that the season of Advent in the Christian calendar year is perhaps my favorite. Why? Because it seems outrageous to me. Not only is John the Baptist an outrageous character, but the poetry of Isaiah the prophet woven in and throughout the lectionary in these weeks seems outrageous as well. Richard read from Isaiah chapter 61 this morning about bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, comforting those who mourn, raising up the former devastations, repairing the ruined cities, righteousness and praise springing up everywhere. More so, in other places Isaiah declares that the wolf shall lie with the lamb, no one shall hurt or destroy, wisdom and justice shall reign in the land. See for yourself in the verses we'll sing in the hymn *Isaiah the Prophet Has Written of Old* following this sermon.

It may be quite difficult for us right now to imagine a world of rejoicing where "good news comes and righteousness abounds." No more sounds of weeping, no more homeless people whose homes have been devastated by hurricane, earthquake or warfare, no more terrorized folk to cry out. God will bless and make the force of life palpably available. Persons and families will live in well being, in justice, without jeopardy or grief. God will be attentive knowing who and what is needed.

It seems so outrageous that none of us really believe it. It is outrageous because certainly God is way beyond our capacity and even beyond our imagination. In our fatigue, our self-sufficiency, and our cynicism, we believe that none of this could really happen today. It's all poetic fantasy, and there is of course the relentless presence and persistence of injustice and grief and terror and destruction, and it will never end, not in any future we can conjure at the moment.

But this is precisely why I like Advent. We can imagine the power and presence of God that lies beyond us or exists in spite of us. If we, though reluctantly, receive it willingly, it almost becomes an evangelical antidote to our fatigue and cynicism. We hold it eagerly because it is a spiritual resolution to our spent self-sufficiency, when we are at the edge of our coping. We want to grasp the vision and hold it eagerly, because somehow the good news of which Isaiah poetically speaks will overmatch our cynicism that imagines there is nothing good or new or sustaining that can enter our world.

"The proper work of poetry like Isaiah," writes scholar and theologian Walter Bruggeman, "invites us to cut free beyond ourselves and to entertain the notion that other purposes for goodness and other power for healing and other promise for shalom, for peace are indeed loosed in the world. Advent is a pondering of this outrageousness that will outflank our weary Christmas."

So this is what we have. Poetry that we take as outrageous, so beyond our imagination that there seems not much to do with it at the moment. It is such a large vision that we

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 11, 2005

wait and we watch and we hope. But what to do while we hope, watch and wait? What are we waiting for? Let us consider, for starters, moving from the large vision of Isaiah to the small discipline of John the Baptist. If John embodies the old, and Jesus embodies the new, perhaps we take as our Advent work while we wait for Christmas this enterprise of humility, of decrease/increase. How might we do that?

Here is what Walter Bruggemann suggests:

Decrease what is old and habitual and destructive in our lives so that perhaps the new life giving power of God may grow larger in us.

Decrease what is greedy, what is frantic consumerism, for the increase of simple, life giving sharing.

Decrease what is fearful and defensive, for the increase of life giving compassion and generosity.

Decrease what is fraudulent and pretense, for the increase of life-giving truth telling in your life, truth telling about you and your neighbor, about the sickness of our society and our enmeshment in that sickness.

Decrease what is hateful and alienating, for the increase of healing and forgiveness, which finally are the only source of life.

This season of Advent basks in and holds many great promises, is pregnant with possibility. But in the meantime there are daily disciplines, day-to-day work that requires not only our time but also our intention, which has nothing to do with the busyness that the world imposes on us in this holy season. Needless to say, without our knowing, God is at work somehow to bring poetic promises to fruition. It has been said that God is not in the business of doing the work of redeciding our life. There is for us the staggering possibility of choosing real life and turning away from the killing in which we are very well practiced.

What are we waiting for? Advent is not for sitting around, but it is for pondering and noticing, embracing, renouncing, receiving. We watch while we notice the increase of real God-bearing living, of sharing, of growing in compassion, of generosity, of hope, of truth telling. Advent is not a time of casual waiting. It is a demanding piece of work. It requires that we attend to both the outrageousness of God and the daily work of decreasing. Advent is a time of active hope, marked by humility, discernment and mystery. Isaiah and John remind us that hope that is grounded in the power and mystery of one to come is far different from the hope that we have grounded in ourselves and our claims to light and truth. As the contemporary prophet Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic has written, "Humanity will have to go through many more Chernobyls and Rwandas before it understands how unbelievably shortsighted a human being can be who has forgotten that he (or she) is not God."

As one writer puts it: "We have to beware of and challenge religious communities that claim to be enlightened, preachers who claim to have a corner on truth, governments that ignore the poor, and pundits who claim to know the answers. Hope comes not from the

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
December 11, 2005

emperor, the scribe, the master technocrat or the high priest, but rather from a God who works in and through historical anguish. To believe in an Advent hope is not to deny the despair or ignore the fear. It is to expect and watch without illusion.”

The hope that is God’s gift to faith is therefore precisely hope – not sight, not inevitability, not finality. It must be grasped by communities of faith and by all of us who, from whatever sources of longing, imagination, and common grace, glimpse possibilities for what is new. It must become hope in action. What are we waiting for?

You and I, in the final analysis, do not suffer from a case of mistaken identity. We are the people of God, however undecided, imperfect, skeptical, cynical we may be. Advent indeed is more than a season: it is a state of being in which we are all called to respond, to the hope and identity of God planted deep within our own hearts: our yearning for justice, for peace, for love; our desire to heal the hunger, poverty, and disease of our world; our longing for something new to break into our shattered world.

In our secret yearnings we wait for your coming, and in our grinding despair we doubt that you will.

*We dwell in the midst of cynical people, and we have settled for what we can control
In this privileged place we are surrounded by witnesses who yearn more than do we
And by those who despair more deeply than do we.*

We do not understand why the innocents must be slaughtered; we know that your reign comes in violence and travail.

Our time would be a good time for your reign to come, because we have had enough of violence and travail.

Look upon us, your people

In this season of hope which runs so quickly to fatigue

And in this season of yearning which becomes so quarrelsome.

*Give us the grace and the impatience to wait for your coming to the bottom of our toes,
To the edges of our fingertips.*

We do not want our several worlds to end.

Come in your power and come in your weakness in any case

And make all things new.

(adapted from prayers of Walter Bruggemann)

Amen.