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AMDG

Second Sunday of Advent A – December 8, 2019

Why didn't John follow Jesus? It's been a question I've often reflected on. Though we have nothing in the Gospels that explicitly say that John, Jesus' relative, didn't follow Jesus. Yet, nowhere does it say that John ended his ministry and became a disciple. In fact, John continued to attract followers, preach and baptize until he was imprisoned and beheaded. Later in Matthew, from prison John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And, Jesus responds, "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." I wonder how John must have taken that answer. If John was Jesus' lead man, the prophet sent to announce his coming, and humbly baptized him when he came, why was he not a follower, and why was he incredulous about Jesus as Messiah even to the end?

I think the answer is in today's Gospel. John preached the coming of a fierce Messiah, one who would come with fire and winnowing fork, separating the wheat from the chaff. Some scholars believe that John may have been part of the Essene movement, a group of religious fanatics who separated themselves from the corrupt Temple. From the cliffs overlooking the Dead Sea they awaited the coming of not one, but two Messiahs to bring destruction on a sinful nation and usher in a new age of religious purity for Israel. His angry words against the Pharisees and Sadducees would seem to support that view. And, in a time of great political turmoil in Palestine, there were many other itinerant preachers who whipped up the confused people into a frenzy of expectation for a Messiah who would come and rid them of the Roman invaders and the corrupt temple elite who supported the Romans.

But, Jesus wasn't that Messiah, was he? He didn't come with torch and winnowing fork. He didn't take up the symbolic axe at the foot of the tree. He didn't stoke the fires of hatred and division that were already

blazing. He came preaching love and forgiveness. He came not to point fingers at people, but, to direct their attention to God within them. I imagine John might have been pretty confused and disappointed. Having given his life to preparing the way for the Messiah, only to find that the Messiah wasn't a warrior or judge, but a lover. Rather than an axe and winnowing fork, the Messiah extended hands of healing and acceptance. Can you imagine how John must have felt in prison, awaiting execution, to believe that he was mistaken about the Messiah. Why couldn't he eagerly embrace a Messiah preaching love rather than destruction? And, John was the precursor. He was sent by God to prepare the way. Wearing a hair shirt and eating only what he could forage in the desert, he must have been quite a terrifying sight. Why did Jesus' forerunner have to be so scary?

Well, sadly I think as human beings we seem to find it easy to embrace dark, pessimistic leaders. What grabs our attention seems to be fear and anger, not love and acceptance. I don't know why that is. It's a mystery I'd like to talk over with God some day. But, what sells newspapers has always been bad news, not gentle news. And, perhaps God knows that about us. God knows what gets our attention, and once our attention has been pulled away from our petty fears and insecurities, God can turn the conversation around. Be not afraid. You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.

Hebrew prophetic literature is like this. The prophets fill pages and pages of accusations and threats, enumerating God's many gripes against his people and detailing the terrible punishments that will befall them. But, then woven through those same fiery pages are words of forgiveness, comfort, and longing. Reconciliation rather than retribution. God's true nature shines through the scary face we would give him, calling us into the closest and most intimate relationship we can imagine, a life of such joy and peace it that can only be described poetically, because our egos cannot grasp it. A wolf living with a lamb. A cow and a lion eating together. Children playing fearlessly around a snakes' nest. Those contrary images catch our attention too. They turn us away from the scary God of retribution to a God who holds the tension of opposites in his loving hands.

This is the Messiah John cleared the way for. What Jesus came to burn were our scorecards, what he came to winnow out were the weeds in our hearts, what he came to destroy were the walls we've built to separate us from our true selves, from one another and from God.

So, why do we seem to prefer see God as a scary judge up there somewhere, or as a benevolent favor-bestower who does hands out the rewards when we're good? Because the true relationship God wants with us is really scary - where we are completely vulnerable, completely open, completely ourselves. Not who we imagine ourselves to be, not who want others to see us as, but as ourselves, the beloved God made us to be.

It is when we come to God without pretense that we encounter the real God. And, it's often in some of the most painful times of our lives, the bleak mid-winter times, when we don't know which way to turn, or when we face a cold hard truth we've been trying to ignore, or when we realize we can't continue this way anymore and going back is no longer an option, there's only forward into the unknown. It's there that we meet the helpless child in a manger, it is there God chooses to manifest the fullness of God's being which is Loving kindness. Not when we're all spiffed up and successful, not when we're hip, slick and cool, not when we think we've got all the answers. It's when we are humble, when we are lowly, when we are afraid that God shows us the glory of lowliness. That is the repentance God seeks, turning away from our self-sufficiency, our self-deception, and self-righteousness into God's loving embrace.

In this season of prayerful expectation and preparation, may we have the grace to seek God, not where we would have God, and not how God may have been portrayed for us, but where God really is, in our most vulnerable places, in our places of longing, in our places of sadness and fear. And, when we let our guards down enough may we see there the outstretched arms of the one True God who is Love, Christ Jesus.  
Amen.

## The Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## Old Testament

### Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the  
ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

## **The Response**

### **Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19**

Deus, iudicium

1 Give the King your justice, O God, \*  
and your righteousness to the King's Son;

2 That he may rule your people righteously \*  
and the poor with justice;

3 That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, \*  
and the little hills bring righteousness.

4 He shall defend the needy among the people; \*  
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.

5 He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, \*  
from one generation to another.

6 He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, \*  
like showers that water the earth.

7 In his time shall the righteous flourish; \*  
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

18 Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, \*  
who alone does wondrous deeds!

19 And blessed be his glorious Name for ever! \*  
and may all the earth be filled with his glory.  
Amen. Amen.

## **The Epistle**

## **Romans 15:4-13**

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,  
and sing praises to your name";

and again he says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";

and again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
and let all the peoples praise him";

and again Isaiah says,

"The root of Jesse shall come,  
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him the Gentiles shall hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **The 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."