

Sermon December 8, 2013 “Advent Hope: What God Alone Can See”

Isaiah 11:1-10 Matthew 3:1-12

*Children’s time: Seeds - we do not know what they will be*

Imagine, if you will, a young Nelson Mandela, walking with his grandfather in 1927. Nine years old, black, living in white-ruled South Africa. “Grandpa, will I live as long as you? Will I be smart? Do you think I’ll ever go to college? Will there be anything special about my life?” This is an imagined conversation, but think of the grandfather’s challenge in the face of such questions. What could he have said? Would he have to tell his grandson that there was very little hope for much of a future for Nelson, because of the fact that blacks were not given opportunities? There was little hope to see in those days in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela died this past week at the age of 95. He did go to college, even graduate school. He was smart, and he had deep wisdom. Because he stood up for what he believed in the face of the oppression of his day, he was arrested and imprisoned for 27 years. Through his willingness to forgive those who imprisoned him and to use his many abilities and winning personality to change things in South Africa, he led the movement that ended up stopping Apartheid and even became the first black President of South Africa! His life ended up inspiring people throughout the world. Was he perfect? No! But he became a tremendous instrument of God to bring forth something new, a possibility many had refused or been unable to see. Who ever would have foreseen what his life would be?

The season of Advent speaks of God at work in our world, bringing forth what God alone envisions. God sees the life in every seed, God sees the possibilities of each human life, and for God even the bleakest darkness is an opportunity for Light to shine.

In our own lives, it is easy for us to see the darkness, our limitations, the things wrong in this world, the relationships that are broken, the illnesses that threaten to defeat us, the wrong choices that hurt, and our self-defeating reactions...

The world of Isaiah was just as dark or darker than anything we face; the days of Jesus were, too. It looked as though God’s kingdom didn’t have a leg to stand on: the Jews in Judah would be defeated, and throughout the history of God’s people, the people had stubbornly chosen their own selfish ways over obedience to God, over and over again. There was just a stump left of the kingdom David had established. And in the day of Jesus and John the Baptizer, things were terribly dismal, because the Romans occupied the promised land and the Jewish religious authorities were intent on making things okay for themselves... Things were bleak at best.

But God saw something else. God saw possibilities, that a shoot would come forth out of the cut-down stump of Israel and that it would become able to produce fruit, life, hope and peace!

So here we are in a rather conflicted world on this second Sunday in Advent, making our lists and perhaps struggling to find our Christmas spirit. Some of us grieve the loss of a loved one. Many worry about money, jobs, or a place to live. Some of us are concerned over the future of our children, even our adult children... Some of us are dealing with challenging health issues or the decisions that come with advanced age. We all yearn for peace and goodwill...

We light Advent candles in church to signify what we ourselves may not see right now: that God is at work to bring forth Light into our world and our lives. God gave the Light through the birth of a baby over 2000 years ago; and God gives Light today, in 2013, whenever a person receives the Savior and is willing to see that God is yet at work right here.

John the Baptist/Baptizer told people who didn't see much to celebrate in their lives to get right with God or else! To repent means "To turn around." No more "MY WAY," warned the prophet. You must turn to God's way! Repent! To repent means to see an error and then to do something about it. If people repeatedly fall on my uneven sidewalk and I keep saying "I'm sorry" each time as I give them some Bactine and a Band-Aid, that's not repentance. If, however, I realize that I must change the situation and I have the sidewalk smoothed out, I have repented. I have corrected a situation that was hurting others.

In "life" terms, repentance is the process of looking around and inside and seeing where we are falling short of God's will for us. It involves confession where we admit to ourselves and to God that we're not able to make our lives right and good on our own, and that we are ready to give God a chance to work in our hearts.

Fred Craddock, eminent preacher, former UMC Bishop, and Professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, suggests that Advent - the four weeks the church sets aside to prepare for the birth of Jesus each year - is actually not a season. "Advent is not a season. Advent is our way of responding to a God who comes to us. We didn't invent this. It is in the nature of God. God is the one who comes to us. Not always according to our calculation, not always the way we would desire, but God does come in ways that are appropriate to God's justice and to God's grace." (*The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock*, pp. 286-7)

Years ago Joe Pennel, in his book, *THE WHISPER OF CHRISTMAS*, told the story of his neighbor who told him that she and her grown daughter had been alienated from one another for years. The only communication had been through telegrams, to notify each other of a change of address. One day the mother received a telegram informing her that her daughter was about to be married for the fourth time in some distant city. Joe encouraged the mother to turn away from her personal wilderness of past disappointments and anger with her daughter and instead, to try a first step TOWARD the daughter. She sent a gift for the wedding, breaking their years-long pattern of impersonal telegrams. This repentance opened the door for restored relationship. (*The Whisper of Christmas*, Joe E. Pennel, Jr., pp. 40-41)

Most of us would probably not miss John the Baptist if we were to skip over him, but Christians who have gone before us have realized that this wild prophet's message is important for us. He's radical, challenging, and he challenges any of us who would aim to have a nice, safe, little Christmas. Why? Because if Christmas really is God coming down to earth in human form to save us, then we need to be serious about it. There's a judgment involved: those who prepare for and receive the Christ and follow him will find blessing. Those who don't, won't.

Most of us don't want to be fanatics about our religion. In fact, we'd probably cross to the other side of the street if John the Baptist happened to be preaching on it. But in a day when many folks

wonder if the Bible is relevant and whether church is necessary, the prophet's message is crucial. It warns us to wake up and realize that this is not as much about US as it is about GOD! We had better get that straight! In Jesus Christ God offers us abundant life, a way to soar through valleys and dark times knowing that God's Holy Spirit is bearing us up on wings of faith, *if* we will but trust God... So John the Baptist yells into our hearts: GO FOR IT!! THIS IS THE WAY OF LIFE AND THE WAY TO LIFE. Repent: let God's ways be *your* ways!! Trust and serve God!

We're already starting to decorate and shop and put gifts under this tree for others and maybe send cards and get into the Christmas spirit. But the best road to Christmas is to let the challenges of John the Baptist make a dent in our hearts. Where do I need to make changes? What would Jesus have me do today with my life? What would God have me notice? How can I share hope and love with others? That's repenting, that's trying to see what God sees and what God wants us to see...

A story: "Grandpa Nybakken loved life, especially when he could play a trick on somebody. At those times his large Norwegian frame would shake with laughter while he feigned innocent surprise, exclaiming, 'Oh, forever-more!' But on a cold Saturday in downtown Chicago, God played a trick on him.

"Grandpa Nybbakken worked as a carpenter. On this particular day, he volunteered to build some crates to hold the clothes his church was sending to an orphanage in China. When he finished building the crates, he helped pack them full of clothing and load them on the trucks that would take them to the shipping docks. He felt good that he could contribute to the project, even in a small way.

"On his way home, he reached into his shirt pocket to get his glasses. They were gone. He mentally replayed his earlier actions and realized what had happened. The glasses had slipped out of his pocket unnoticed and fallen into one of the crates. His brand new glasses were heading for China! "The old carpenter had very little money, certainly not enough to replace his glasses. He was upset at the thought of having to buy another pair. 'It's not fair,' he told God as he drove home in frustration. 'I've been very faithful in giving of my time to your work, and now this happens.' "Several months later, the director of the Chinese orphanage came to speak at the old carpenter's small church. He began by thanking the people for their faithfulness in supporting the orphanage. "But most of all,' he said, 'I must thank you for the glasses you sent last year. You see, the Communists had just swept through the orphanage, destroying everything, including my glasses. I was desperate. Even if I had the money, there was simply no way to replace those glasses. My coworkers and I were much in prayer about the situation. Then your crates arrived. When my staff removed one of the covers, they found a pair of glasses lying on top.'

"The missionary paused long enough to let his words sink in. Then, still gripped with the wonder of it all, he continued, 'Folks, when I tried on the glasses, it was as though they had been custom-made for me! I want to thank you for your thoughtfulness and generosity!'

"The congregation listened, pleased about the miraculous glasses. But the missionary surely must have confused their church with another, they thought. There were no eyeglasses on their list of items to be sent overseas. But sitting quietly in the back, with tears streaming down his face, was an ordinary carpenter who on an ordinary day had been used in an extraordinary way by the Master

Carpenter himself.” *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, p. 70-71) Something God alone could see.

This Advent season, each of us needs something new in our lives. May God’s light shine in whatever darkness or uncertainty we are experiencing . May God’s love fill our hearts and lead us to repent, that we may open our eyes to the way of our Lord and to the possibilities that *God* sees for our lives. Amen. Our hymn is one of hope and faith, the Hymn of Promise, # 707.