

Getting Straight

Advent is a really good time to get set straight, especially when it comes to what we think we know. We modern folk like our comparisons; we like to divide stuff up; categorize it; label it; make it safe.

For example, it is often said that the God of the Old Testament is a God of fear, of anger; while the God of the New Testament is a God of love. It's a simple and neat way to make sense of things. We say it. We believe it. But in fact, it's really not true.

Some of the most beautiful love songs ever written are from the mouth of the God of Moses and the prophets. Today's beautiful poem from Isaiah ("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"), is only one example among countless many.

We say too that John the Baptist was an angry prophet; eating bugs and denouncing everyone; while Jesus, well, Jesus, is that gentle soul, softly

knocking at our door, patiently waiting for us to open that door.

Many of you probably have that picture in your home. My folks always did. We have it too. You know the one. The calm Jesus, standing outside the wooden door. The mild mannered Jesus, standing outside. If you look closely, there's no door handle for Jesus to turn; presumably, the handle is inside, for you or I to open.

You know also the verse it refers to: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

There is a well-known hymn about that same verse, that same picture:

"O Jesus, Thou art standing
Outside the fast-closed door.
In lowly patience waiting
To pass the threshold o'er.
O Jesus Thou art pleading
In accents meek and low."

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

It suggests the Jesus that John is announcing, the Jesus we are all waiting for, is meek and mild!

But that hymn, and that painting, while soft and lovely and probably very comforting; completely distorts what surrounds, what is the truth of: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

It distorts who it is that John announces today. It distorts the Jesus we are expecting. And so, this Advent Day, let us be set straight.

The Jesus we are expecting is not the Jesus that John announced so long ago. We expect, we are waiting for, the Risen Lord to come again. And that coming is best imagined not through the eyes of John the Baptist, but in the visions of John of Patmos: the author of the Book of Revelation. Here is how John of Patmos describes Jesus.

"To begin with, the face of Jesus is not gentle. Here is how John of Patmos pictures the face of Christ as he speaks to the Church in the opening chapters of Revelation:

'Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning, I saw seven golden lamp stands, and in the midst of the lamp stands, one like a Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were as white as wool, white as snow; his eyes were like flames of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters....From his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining full strength.'

"That voice, like the sound of many waters, doesn't seem to be speaking in 'accents meek and low.' It is instead an impatient voice, an angry voice, addressing the church, His Church:

'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.'

'Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten *** so be zealous and repent!'

Then, and only then, does the Lord speak the now familiar phrase: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." [Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 161-2].

Just as John the Baptist today calls out the Jewish people to truly turn around, to truly return to life in the presence of God; so too Jesus calls out to the Church, to you and I, to return as well.

Jesus, in Revelation, sounds a great deal like John the Baptist in today's gospel. Seeing Jesus in the shoes of John the Baptist may be shocking to some. It is shocking because for far too long we Christians have tried desperately to create a God in our image, rather than bending ourselves to more resemble the God in whose image we are made.

Advent is, for us, a shocking season. Out there, the biggest concern may be what to buy Uncle Ralph for Christmas; in here, we know enough to tremble.

When God visits his people, business as usual comes to an abrupt stop. When God visits his people, change is in the air. Not a change of hairstyle or wardrobe, but a change of heart, a change in life, a change of direction.

This is the Advent of God! Its hope, its destiny, is the mountain of God where all of creation is at peace. But to climb that mountain, even as God brings the mountain near to us, we each of us must confront the wolf that lives within; we each of us must throw off the snake that lives within; we each of us must calm the lion that lives within.

As John told the Jews, so Jesus tells the Church:

Put an ax to resentments; winnow greed and fear and indulgence; tear out from the root pride and anger and impatience! So says the Advent of God!

"Behold, I stand at the door and wait," says Jesus.

"Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near," says John.

The message is the same. Old and new are joined together; or, better, the old is completed in the new. Yet, neither old nor new ends in condemnation.

Advent is a time of judgment. Advent is as well a time of second chances, of new beginnings, of fresh starts. This too is Advent!

The prodigal son who treats his dad as if he's already dead; turns around and embarks on his journey home, a second chance.

The tenth diseased man who was cleansed turns around and give thanks, while the other 9 continue on their way.

The adulteress, whom no one can stone, since no one is sinless, turns around and receives a new beginning.

Advent is that fresh fallen snow that blankets in white what was only yesterday a junk heap, an eyesore.

Advent is, for you, for me, for everyone willing to

turn around, "less about looking at the past and saying 'I'm sorry,' than looking to the future and saying, "Wow!" [Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 79].

"Wow!" at the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe; golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair white as wool, white as snow.

"Wow!" at the relentless insistence of the Father to gather all of his children.

"Wow!" at the hope of the world, when enemies become friends, and pain is sent packing.

Such is the two-edged sword of the Son of Man, the Messiah announced by John. One edge that cuts away at our self-satisfaction; the other edge that heals our wounds.

The young woman asked the goldsmith how many times he put the gold back into the fire. "How do you know," she asked, "when all the impurities are gone?"

The goldsmith replied: "When I can see my own

face shining in the gold."

In Advent, our Lord refines us, until he can see his own face shining in ours.

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