

December 4, 2011
2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B
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Christ Church Cathedral

Return to Me, Repent, Be Forgiven

Earlier this week while I was preparing my sermon for today, it was late in the day and I was sitting at my desk at home. The rain was coming down hard it was thrashing up against the window and pounding the roof. I was reading a commentary on Second Isaiah, which contains the passage we have for today. Suddenly, the light flickered. Flickered again. Then all went dark. I sat there wondering where the flashlight was. The lights came on and then went out again. I finally remembered and found my way to my nightstand and to the flashlight. Then I realized I could not read easily and hold a flashlight and went and got a candle. As I sat there with my book and candle, I pondered the power of nature to level the best efforts of humanity to power itself. My endeavor to read in the darkness was powered simply by some composite of wax with string and a match. Then just as I settled in to read some more, the power came back on and stayed on, at least for the time being. I remember feeling slightly disappointed. I suppose I could have turned the desk lamp off but I didn't and shortly thereafter went to bed.

As the recent storms have shown us, our power is fragile and uncertain. Are fact-finding studies important for solving the problems created by the storms? Yes. Will they diminish the power of creation to wreak havoc in the world? No. It seems in as much as we may try to exert control over our world, our best efforts cannot allay tragedy at the most and inconvenience at the least.

If the storms are not evident of this then the global financial crisis continues to be. The crisis continues to rock our country and the world. The markets are buoyed by hopeful developments and then another seems to quash the gains that have been made. The impact has been felt across continents and nations. Our own nation, states, and cities, are scrambling to pare down budgets. Families are cast from their homes, the hungry increase, those without health insurance rise. Religious communities, such as our own diocese, are making difficult decisions as are many churches. No community is exempt from the effects of this crisis. It gets right down to families and individuals, and I would even say within the soul itself.

In regard to this crisis I have been doing something unlike me. I have been looking at my iphone app of the stock market and I do it every day. I too am buoyed by the hope of the climbs and worried by sudden declines. I look at daily trends, weekly trends, monthly, three months, one year, two years. The app lets me read real time commentary, with articles entitled "Oil prices drop, markets rise," "unemployment figures worse than expected markets drop." "What in the world am I doing," I have asked myself as I repeatedly look at this aperture into the world, compounding my anxiety with this repeated question. Mountains and valleys, mountains and valleys. Then this week, a startling revelation. The prophet, Isaiah announces,

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

The Lord levels the upturns and downturns – are they still there, yes, but those turns are of the world. This community of Christ Church is in the world and can stand in the midst of these fluctuations because they have

been leveled by God's power. I need not know how this happens but simply that it is – as the prophet tells Jerusalem, your exile no longer defines you – you are defined as recipients of God's love and compassion. As I read these passages, the peace which passes understanding began to rest in my heart, combating my anxiety – my anxiety which is really my sin. My sin, my turning away from God, is the notion of thinking this is all up to me, that I can combat my own sin. My preoccupation with my sins keeps me from hearing the cry of the poor. Simply put, sin is a life without God, doomed to anxiety, confusion, futility, and dread of darkness. Isaiah again,

*Comfort, O comfort your people says the Lord,
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid, that she has received
from the Lord's hand double for all her sins*

Yes, I thought, this is what I needed to hear, what my soul needs to hear, what my family, the church, the diocese, Hartford, my hospital, my nation, and my world needs to hear. The question I asked myself needs not to have been “What am I doing?” but “What is my faith doing?” Once that happened I felt that I was set aright, my eyes were opened once again, my heart turned toward the other in need, I knew again there is a path in the wilderness.

The movement of turning away from God and turning back, from sin to reconciliation, is the heart of our scripture for today. This is achieved through the act of repentance – of realizing that we are distracted, confused, or lost and then turning back to God. Why this message now here in Advent? You may have heard Advent described as the “Little Lent” for this reason. Preoccupation with this world, like me with the markets, is often the culprit – it turns our attention from preparing for the coming of Christ, his first birth into the world. In the wilderness of our preoccupation with this world, we encounter John the baptizer who proclaims “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” What does this mean for us in Advent? Our baptism is our pivot point in the act of repentance. I believe a recollection of our baptism is the key to our turning on the path toward the manager. I am convinced this is most fruitfully accomplished in community and not in solitary. The power of our community proclamation of baptism confirms that. The gathering of our community and what we proclaim is the prime reason that I feel better whenever I leave here. The feeling better is not simply feeling comforted. The feeling better is also embracing the necessity of challenge to get back on the path toward God.

The challenge for us in the work of repentance is laid out in the passage from the Second Letter of Peter. Do not forget, the passage says, that God's time is not our time. Yes, God is patient, *and* remember “the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.” Our involvement in God's creation is that we are enveloped in a cosmological, redemptive event. However, one may want to parse the meaning of this passage in terms of repentance, there is no time like the present. Put simply God is here now, we only need to turn God now. We are God's and God's alone. This causes me to recall the theologian, Paul Tillich, saying, “Accept the fact that you are accepted.”

The message last week from Dean Pendleton was about our journey home, our home in God where God is ready to be sought out and found and that this journey calls for our attentiveness during the constant drumbeat of Advent waiting.

The message this week is the journey to the manager is mapped out in the wilderness, where the mountains are made low and the valleys rise and there is abundance of comfort and forgiveness as we turn in repentance through our baptism.

Often I need a message more simply put:

Advent I – Come home to me, stay awake.

Advent II – Turn to me, jump in the river, be forgiven.

I would like to end by reading you a poem written by T. Crunk, one of my favorite poets, from his book Living in the Resurrection. It is always a risky thing to say what a poem is about –in the poem a man visits his grandmother in a nursing home, both are in a kind of wilderness of illness and grief and how at the center of all this, faith is immersed in baptism.

Visiting My Grandmother at Oak Lawn

In a niche above the main doors is a statue of a saint, his left arm broken off at the elbow, that they've never bothered to replace or take down. Before it was a nursing home it was the old TB hospital, and there isn't an oak tree anymore within three blocks.

Today my grandmother's roommate isn't in, so she is alone. She is sitting in her chair by the window, and she recognizes me as soon as I go in. We talk while I open the curtains for her, straighten the things on her nightstand. I go for a pitcher of fresh ice water.

When I return she is worried that I haven't been saved, wants me to tell her again about being baptized. So I do, even though I have to tell the same story every other time I come –

I tell her she was standing in the shade of a honey locust on the bank, beside my mother and father and brother, when my grandfather led us across the strip of pasture to the river. There were five of us I think, and we had taken turns changing clothes in Verna Woolsey's too shed. I tell her she was wearing a purple, white-dotted dress. She says she remembers, and remembers singing "Shall We Gather at the River" as we moved down into the water, as my grandfather waded out waist-deep, into the sunlight.

She has turned to face the window again by now. She is nodding slowly. "Baptized into union with Christ Jesus," she says, the way she does sometimes when she's been listening. "Baptized into his death," she says, quoting Romans.

We talk a while longer, mostly about the rest of the family. I give her the shampoo and nut bread my mother has sent, look to see if there is anything else she needs. Then I call for one of the aids to come and keep her in her room, otherwise she will follow me out to the car, begging me to take her home.

I hear her calling after me as I walk the long corridor toward the small glass door at the end, which looks as though it's getting larger as I get closer. Or else it's me, getting smaller. And I've never told her what my brother told me after he had done it – that when you come up out of the river, your soul is new, and you know why hell is fire and why heaven is blue, like water.

T. Crunk, Living in the Resurrection, Yale University Press, 1995.