

**Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Advent Dec 16 2007 Year A**  
**Isaiah 35:1-10, Psalm 146:4-9, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11**  
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*Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?*

John the Baptist stuck out his neck once too often. John challenged people, demanded more of them than any law could demand; called for a radical change in their hearts and minds, and had no fear of those in authority. He challenged everyone in the same manner. We all know the ending of his story. John was jailed and then beheaded.

Some might say John was a risk-taker. But if he was, it was risk-taking that grew out of his relationship to God and his belief that there was more to life than trying to keep 684 laws. The great Rabbi Hillel was once asked, “Can you explain Judaism to me while I stand on one leg?” And he replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind. The rest is commentary.” John lived out that commentary. He was not about laws and regulations; he was about relationships, relationship to God and to one another.

Jesus picked up on this theme and, in a gentler manner, continued to preach the same message of forgiveness and compassion. Like Hillel, Jesus believed Judaism was about loving God with all one’s heart, mind and soul and one’s neighbor as one’s self.

St. Luke in his gospel has Jesus beginning his ministry in Nazareth by quoting from the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

The message Jesus sent back to John was this: “I am continuing the work you have begun.” Jesus did not point to the words he was preaching, he pointed to the ministry he was continuing from John, albeit in a less threatening manner.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.* Our ministry begins with an internal metanoia, a change of heart, that lets God guide us and open us to being risk-takers, to being open to the call of God from within, to respond to the needs of those around us.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the Good news to the poor.* Jesus did not only associate with those who were literally poor, he also spent time in the homes of the wealthy. What can be concluded from this is that spiritual poverty knows no socioeconomic boundaries. The spiritually poor had the good news preached to them. The good news that the kingdom of God is within them. The Blind could not see this. The rich young man who had kept all the commandments since his childhood could not take the risk of letting go; the farmer who had a great crop and decided to build bigger barns to horde his great crop rather than consider sharing it, was unaware that he was going to die that night. We can become blind to our spiritual needs, our spiritual poverty, as we become caught up in the materialism of this world and all the things we need, want and must have; as we become caught up in religion rather than spirituality.

It is difficult to take a risk without having faith and having faith calls us to have open minds. Zacchaeus, climbed a tree to see Jesus, and having meet him took the risk and changed his heart and mind. There are those who live within the safety of, and hide behind their religious beliefs,

their dogmas and their rituals. But these things are about religion and not faith and certainly not about spirituality.

At our baptism we made a covenant with God, not the church. That baptismal covenant began with an acknowledgement of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and then continued: *Will you continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?*

*Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*

*Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?*

*Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?*

*Will you strive, i.e., go out of your way, for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*

To each of these questions we responded *"I will with God's help."*

Our Ministry, and we are all ministers, is to point to the Christ in the actions of our everyday lives. Howard Thurman grew up in the cotton fields of Florida in the 1900's, was given a scholarship to college. He went on to study under Rufus Jones, a well-known Quaker philosopher and mystic; became dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University and the first Black dean at Marsh Chapel at Boston University in 1953. Life Magazine listed him as one of the twelve best preachers in the nation. Thurman wrote of Advent and Christmas as seasons of hope. "When the song of the angels is stilled," he wrote, "When the star of the sky is gone. When the kings and princes are home. When the shepherds are back with their flocks. The work

begins... To find the lost. To heal the broken. To feed the hungry. To rebuild the nations. To bring peace among people. To make music in the heart."

Someone once said that if we are not part of the solution we are part of the problem. The sad reality is that the Institutional Church and many within it have been guilty of being part of the problem of the Good News not being preached by word and example. We have, and often still do, hide behind denominationalism, dogma, ritualism, liturgics, piety etc but we do not take the risk to make ourselves vulnerable to one another, to let our light shine in the world around us.

If we really mean it when we said, and continue to say, "I will with the help of God" then we are stepping into uncharted spiritual territory for ourselves. The spiritual life is one that is filled with joy and peace, inner happiness and awareness of the presence of God, and at the same time it can be a life surrounded with distrust, ambivalence, financial and emotional difficulties. The spiritual life is not about feeling good. It's about being real, about being in harmony with our life's work and the spiritual life on which we base our life's values.

*Are you the one who is to come or do we look for another?* On our spiritual journey we will find many who seem like Messiah's. Someone once wrote a book entitled, "If you meet the Buddha on the road kill him." The point being that the real Buddha is inside you. Jesus made this point on more than one occasion *The kingdom of God is within you.* We are not part of the answer to life we are the answer. Each of us, different as each of us are, each of us on different parts of our spiritual journey, are the answer and have the answer within us for our own peace of mind.

Where do we find Jesus the Christ within us? Some find him in books, others in action, others in contemplation, and others in a combination of these. What each of these different paths have in common is a deep desire to make God a real presence in the world around them. Their spiritual life calls them to express it in words, action or in silent prayer. Each of these different personalities share a common gift for finding God within them, finding peace and harmony, finding joy in the service of God, of letting go of that which limits their experience of God and taking the risk to live in total abandonment to the will of God.

As Lane Denson said in this week's email; "In this present time in the church... we cannot just be handed out the answer by some prelate, we must *be* the answer by our faith. For it is the Christ in us that will always recognize and know the Christ in others -- and in all."