TIME FOR A CHANGE AGAIN
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
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Second Sunday of Advent

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

This past week I read an article in the Christian Century by Jonathan Tran entitled “Sold into Slavery: the scourge of human trafficking.” The human slave trade has become a $13 billion industry. Depending on whose numbers you take, there are between 12 and 27 million slaves in the world today. Nearly 90% involve women and children who are forced into prostitution. Certain global economic conditions and dynamics predispose these children and women to their fate.

There are many ways to be enslaved and many ways to treat others as less than human. I’m guessing that our hands are not completely clean.

This is Advent. It’s a time for “the people of the promise” to stand and pray in solidarity with those who sit in darkness in one way or another.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

John the Baptist wasn’t exactly what we think of when we think of Baptists. He wasn’t out there in the wilderness building another “Walmart-size” church, waving the flag, or bashing people with the Bible. He was, however, doing what Baptists once did in this country and what Baptists at their best still do: he was getting his heart right with God and nagging the political and social rulers.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Repent. That is to say, turn away from the personal and social path of destruction and return to the path of righteousness. Repent. Repentance, as it turns out, is not so much about remorse as it is about transformation. The Greek word metanoia is the word translated “repent.” Meta-noia combine meta CHANGE with noia CONSCIOUSNESS. To repent is to undergo a transformation or outlook or consciousness.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Perhaps the best example in our time of a “John the Baptist” was Martin Luther King, Jr. Somewhat by coincidence he was a Baptist. King urged people to repent, to be transformed, to be born again, and to cleanse their hearts of hate, violence and bigotry. And he also urged the powers that be to make laws that promote equality, justice and freedom for all. King believed that people and societies could change. He put it like this:

I still believe that one day, humankind will bow before the altar of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will be the rule of the land.

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths.’

Advent is a good time to get yourself to the wilderness, to that place or state of mind where your senses can be awakened from lethargy, where your heart’s true longings can be revealed.

In those days John appeared in the wilderness.
What days?

*Those days.*

If you turn back a few pages in this lesson, you will find that *in those days* Herod was the ruler and life was cheap. Children didn’t stand much of a chance. And *in those days,* John appeared with a bold and radical invitation. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. A different kind of rule is available and possible.

That was those days.

So what about *these days*? What “Herod” is ruling our lives to no good end *these days?* What person, force, or attitude has a destructive grip on your life and won’t let go?

At the roundtable with college students this past Thursday, we talked a bit about the insanity of our society, about the grip of materialism, of feverish greed, of endless shopping for more and more stuff. No one seems to like what we’ve become as a society but no one seems able to stop and turn us around. It’s as though we live under a demonic tyrant called “conspicuous consumption.” It’s killing us, our children, and the earth. Who or what will save us?

*In those days* John appeared. ‘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.’

Did you hear that? The “chaff” will be burned with fire, which is to say, not everything in us, the church or society is worthwhile. Some things have to go.

It’s time for a change. It’s time to return to the way of love. It’s time to care for more than self. It’s time to make space for a change in your life. It’s time to walk in the woods, climb a mountain, or sit by the river. It’s time to do whatever it takes to get out of the rut and allow time and space for your heart to listen.

Here is the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. again:

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.

I believe that what self-centered people have torn down, other-centered people can build up.

I still believe that one day, humankind will bow before the altar of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will be the rule of the land.

“And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every one shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.”

This morning in the breaking of the bread and in the sharing of the cup at this community table, we stand in the real presence of Christ to experience true communion with God and true community with others. In the silence and in the singing listen for the call of love. I don’t know what it is, but there’s something only you can do this week to prepare the way for love. And, just think, Christ has come to be with us, to feed us with his presence and his love.

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Song 141 “There Is A Longing”