

Year A Second Sunday of Advent Let Us Not Forget What God Feels Like Matthew 3 vv1-12

Throughout Advent we, the Church, think anew about how we can join with God to be part of the movement toward the establishment of a world that is God's will and God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. John the Baptist gives a very precise one-word summary of our Advent preparations: Repent!

As we've talked about before, to repent is not just to be sorry for what you have done. To repent, meaning "to turn", is to be sorry in such a way and to such a degree that you turn your life – heart, mind, soul, body, and strength – toward God and to life in God's ways. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew shows us that the perfection of the kingdom is already partially, though not completely, brought into our world through the life and ministry of Jesus. Our repentance is our first step in joining Jesus in the community moving towards the fullness of the kingdom, making God's goodness a reality.

Of course, such a turning of our lives toward God means a turning away from all that is broken in the world, from all that is contrary to life in God's kingdom. According to New Testament Scholar, Ronald J. Allen, "To repent is to take a clear-minded look at the ways in which one's life colludes with the assumptions and behaviors of the old [broken] age, to turn away from such [collusion], and to turn towards God and the attitudes and actions of the realm of heaven" (workingpreacher.org).

Matthew describes John in much the same way as the prophet Elijah was described back in the book of 2 Kings. Elijah, like John, at great personal peril fearlessly called the people – and especially their leaders – to turn their lives back to God. John's diet of locusts and honey indicates a complete reliance on God to provide for his needs in contrast to the much more complicated, seemingly self-reliant living found in the cities. Compared to John, those living in the city are enmeshed in lives of

accumulating material goods, lives of commerce and business, money, and social status. Notice that John is calling the people out of the cities, into the wilderness with him.

The wilderness is not only the place where the Israelites found themselves completely reliant upon God for their survival, it is also the place where a lot of learning happened. For 40 years, we are told, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness while they learned – they learned to trust God and God’s promises, they learned to live according to God’s ways, and they learned to let go of the life they had lived in the big cities of Egypt – lives of competition for more and better because their lives were filled with the fear of scarcity, the fear of “not enough.” After 40 years in the wilderness, the Israelites finally crossed into God’s promised land, through the Jordan River where John the Baptist now stands.

The wilderness journey is something that we talk about during Lent – our 40 days of Lent echoes the 40 years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness. But Advent, too, is a time of journeying for us since we must reorder our loves and lives to take on the attitudes and behaviours God expects of those who choose life in God’s kingdom. Advent is our journey in the wilderness, learning to trust God and God’s promises rather than relying on the things of the world to meet our needs. It is our time of learning to live according to God’s ways while we still have the time to learn. It is our time to let go of the lives revolving around competition for more and better. But, like the Israelites who had been immersed in the frantic life of the Egyptian world, the Church still falls prey to the fear of scarcity – the fear of “not enough”.

Many church goers have lamented that we do not have enough youthful vigour left among us, we do not have enough helping hands for our fundraisers, we do not

have enough money coming in, we do not have enough people sitting in the pews. That is the oh-so-common world's way of thinking.

But, if you think about it, I'll bet you can see and feel that those "not enough" scenarios and thoughts are changing, disappearing from among us. We're growing in numbers, we have lots of helping hands for every event, we're gaining energy and enthusiasm because we are gaining joy. Joy is the sign not only of God's presence but, more importantly it is the sign that we are aware of God's presence. God is working in us and through us.

Yet, some people will still speak those fear of "not enough" thoughts because that's how they've grown used to thinking and that's how world tells us we must think. Hundreds of people in our communities can't afford to walk into a grocery store to buy food and we walk into a grocery store and buy potted plants to decorate our front steps. Thousands of Canadians go without a proper meal every day and yet Canadians bought thousands of pumpkins with no intention to use them for food and left them to rot outside after Halloween. As neighbourhood children excitedly made their first snowmen of the season, I saw one decked out in winter gear and thought, "How cute" but then I stopped in my tracks and thought, "Wait a minute, we buy and donate winter hats and mitts because people in our community are going without and yet we have so much we're putting them on our snowmen?"

Even the middle-income Canadian lives a life of lavish luxury but, we don't think we do since, for us, it is normal. We have seasonal décor, drawers full of tea towels, extra bedding in our closets, smelly candles and air fresheners, body lotions and perfumes, paintings on our walls, ornaments on our furniture, multiple clocks hanging throughout our homes, sometimes multiple tv's, or multiple cars. When we

get dressed for church, we have a selection of clothes from which to choose. And we pet owners give our dogs and cats toys and treats for Christmas.

Yet society tells us we don't have enough. Society instills the fear of scarcity into us. This fear is contrary to life in God's kingdom. God shows to us a life of abundance...from water at a wedding God gave us hundreds of gallons of the finest wine; from five loaves of bread and two fish came a feast for more than 5000 people with leftovers for the rest of the week; and from the tomb of the dead Messiah came resurrection life.

John calls us to turn away from the fear of scarcity, from the franticness of a life of materiality and status seeking. John calls us to trust in the abundance of God's promises. To rejoice in the multitude of colourful packages that will soon be under our tree to give away to the kids at the Soup Kitchen; to rejoice in the multiple thousands of dollars that our ACW and Guild of St. Joseph will soon be donating to non-profits and charities. This is the abundance of God's kingdom and we share in it.

It is very difficult to shift our reliance away from the security of the things of the world. John saw the Sadducees and Pharisees coming – the elite of Israel's society – and he knew they were unable to let go of their luxurious lifestyles and they were not able to let go of the glory they thought their positions gave to them. John could smell their insincerity a mile away and he blasted them. He tells them that their status will get them nowhere because they did not live lives worthy of the kingdom – they did not produce good fruit. As we learn throughout the Gospels, it is what is in our hearts that will lead us to life with God or not.

God knows our hearts and, as John points out to the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and all who will listen, those hearts will be judged on their fruits of repentance – on the results of a life turned to God. John tells us that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire – images that call to mind both redemption and judgement. Jesus shows to us in his life and death, the fruits of a life turned to God: his practices of inclusion and welcoming, which nurture forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, and wholeness.

Repentance is harder for those more deeply invested in or comfortable with the current order of things, as were the Sadducees and Pharisees who come to observe John's baptism, and as many of us are today. It often takes tragedy or great trouble to jolt comfortable people into seeing the falseness of the world's insistence that property, position, and pocketbook lead to happiness and security. As difficult as life can get, we can let the difficulties give us the gift of learning what truly matters. As difficult as Jesus' coming may be for us, he gives us the greatest gift imaginable – life in God's fully perfect kingdom if we choose that life.

Soon after her brother was born, little Sachi began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. They worried that like most four-year-olds, she might feel jealous and want to hit or shake him, so they said no. But she showed no signs of jealousy. She treated the baby with kindness and her pleas to be left alone with him became more urgent. They decided to allow it. Thrilled, she went into the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack – enough for her curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Sachi walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say quietly, "Baby, tell me what God feels like, I'm starting to forget" (story by Dan Millman, p.290 of *Chicken Soup for the Soul 101 Stories...*).

Let us not forget what God feels like. Let us choose life in God's kingdom. John lets us know that choosing this life is not easy, a whole-of-life turning to God is work, hard work: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight". There is a lot of heavy labour involved in making a crooked path straight. It is hard work to shut down our fears and worries, to place our trust in God's promises and live lives of generous abundance and compassion. In such a life there is always more work to do, more to give. But, as Paul writes: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). We are called according to God's purpose: called to live in God's kingdom, called to reveal God's kingdom, called to therefore hasten the perfection of God's kingdom. And so, we are called to hear the cries of John the Baptist, to leave the city and go to him in the wilderness, to enter into the Jordan River and, through lives turned to God, to enter into God's promised land.

Let us not forget what God feels like. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.