**December 7, 2014 – 2nd Sunday of Advent**

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The other day, I was driving home from work and listening to All Things Considered on the radio. The announcer started in on a story about how the sexual assault statistics in the military aren’t getting much better, despite a concerted effort to address the problem. As I sometimes do, when I’m alone in the car, I felt compelled to yell at the radio.

What the BLEEP is wrong with us?!? Our society is SICK!!! Only I didn’t say “bleep.” I’ll leave it up to your imagination as to what I DID say.

Well, I don’t want to belabor all the evil that’s going on in the world today, nor do I want to descend into the realm of politics, for once. But our society IS sick. There is a great disturbance in the Force, as George Lucas would say. However, this is certainly nothing new.

Imagine the Middle East of John the Baptist’s time. Not unlike France in the 19th and 20th centuries, Palestine had been a major battleground for the world’s superpowers of the time for centuries. The current rulers were the Romans, of course, who were pretty tolerant up to a point, but past that point they were merciless and brutal. The area was far from stable.

As Mark was writing this, depending on which scholar you listen to, Jerusalem was either on the brink of mass destruction because of their many rebellions, or that destruction had just happened. And along with political unrest, as we see all over the world in our own time, there was plenty of corruption and vice.

I can just see John the Baptist yelling, “What the BLEEP is wrong with us?!?!”

Mark’s Gospel, being the first, and the shortest of all the Gospels, starts right in with the appearance of John the Baptist, unlike Matthew’s and Luke’s extensive prologues and John’s otherworldly “In the beginning was the Word.”

But although Mark is short and concise, it’s also really packed with meaning. The first sentence is, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The word for beginning, *arché*, from which we get the word archetype, carries the sense of the absolute origin or source of something – “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” for example. In this case, the source is God.

And what is God the source of? The *euangelion*, from which we get the word evangelism. The Good News, and specifically the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. It’s all there in the title.

Mark then backs up a little to get a running start at telling this good news, and starts by quoting from Isaiah’s prophecy (with a little Malachi thrown in). That entire section of Isaiah was our Old Testament reading for today. I’m not going to re-read it here, but do take some time to read it again yourselves. It’s one of the most beautiful hymns in the Bible, and the source for many a famous Christmas or Easter anthem.

So on the heels of Isaiah’s prophecy, comes John the Baptist, a weird looking dude if ever there was one. It’s like someone called central casting and said, “Send me a fanatical looking prophet type. And put him in some crazy clothes while you’re at it.” Actually, other than the clothes, we don’t know what John looked like. Most of my impressions actually DO come from central casting, come to think of it. He could have been the most rational and clean cut of guys, with only slightly odd taste in clothes and dietary requirements, for all we know.

But whatever he looked like, he sure made an impression on the locals. As he set up shop on the banks of the Jordan, he had people flocking to him. Mark specifically said these people were “all the people of Jerusalem,” which is about twenty miles away. Twenty miles isn’t much these days, but can you imagine walking all the way to Iroquois, say, just to hear a preacher tell you to repent and dunk you in the river? He must have been something to see and hear.

According to the text, John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. I might be alone in this, but I’ve always kind of thought that the baptism he was proclaiming was the one he was actually doing there in the Jordan. But he proclaims another baptism, too.

*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

That’s the real deal. This is what the prophet is telling us to prepare for, to make the paths straight for. For Jesus and the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism set them on the path. The people who came to John came because they recognized that the sickness of the world had made them sick, too, and they wanted to turn their lives around. The word for repentance here is *metanoia*, which literally means a different mind or a changed purpose – a 180 degree turnaround.

The choice was up to them – to choose a different path, and to be ritually cleansed of their sins was what John was offering. But it doesn’t stop there. Once they had made the choice to change, the next step is to let God change them completely.

Think about it for a minute. The physical act of baptism is to be immersed completely in water (or symbolically, as we do it now, but it’s the same thing). So what would it mean to be immersed in the Holy Spirit? The word for Spirit is *pneuma*, or in Hebrew, *ruach*. It means breath. The breath of God. The same breath that created the world. How could we be immersed in that breath and come out the same as we were?

John is clear. This isn’t a gentle spring zephyr, lightly blowing the leaves and grass. This is FIRE. This is the essence of God’s power, and we are voluntarily stepping into it. John is saying that someone is coming who will wash us clean with all of the creative power of the universe.

And then we have to live as if we have been completely remade, as if we are as newly created as if we were Adam and Eve. THAT’S the tricky bit. Who we’re waiting for this Advent, is the one who has the power to change us completely, and through us to change the world.

Since John the Baptist brought it up, let’s talk about sin for a minute. I know, we Episcopalians don’t really like to go there, but John is demanding that we do. So what exactly is sin? Sin is focusing on self to the exclusion of anyone else and to the exclusion of God. Think about the big seven – the seven deadly sins, as they are called. They are [wrath](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrath), [greed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greed), [sloth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sloth_%28deadly_sin%29), [pride](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pride), [lust](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lust), [envy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Envy), and [gluttony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gluttony). None of them technically hurts anyone else, unless they are acted upon, but all of them focus on the self. They are self-idolatry.

By this description, we are a very sinful nation. Everything you see around you – advertisements, TV shows, politics, even news – is focused on the self. It’s all about me, me, me. Even some religions are guilty. I’m thinking of the ones who exclude certain people from their ranks, and declare that only people who live a certain way are saved.

I’m not going to head down that slippery slope, because you might quite rightly call me out for doing the same thing. So I’ll fall back on one of our few doctrines in the Episcopal Church. You are admitted into the Body of Christ – are saved, if you will – at your baptism. Period. It’s up to God to figure out how that works, and I’m happy to leave it to him.

But baptism is only the beginning – well, it’s both the end AND the beginning – kind of like Advent. If we have truly repented and turned our lives around, we have to live our lives as if we mean that, not as if it’s something that’s done once and finished. Being remade by the breath of God doesn’t stop us from being human. What it does is open our eyes to our sinful natures and turn away from them and toward God at every chance we get.

As some of you know, both of my parents were alcoholics, and both were in recovery for a long time. My dad embraced the Alcoholics Anonymous model as his way of staying sober. At the beginning, as many recovering addicts will tell you, you look at your sobriety in terms of one day at a time. Actually, for some, like my dad at the beginning, it was staying sober one hour at a time, or even one minute at a time.

So it is with us recovering sinners – or maybe a better term is “recovering self-addicts.” We need to turn towards God for one day at a time, or one hour, or one minute. And then the next day, and the next, and the next. Pretty soon, it becomes a habit, but even then it’s not one we can take for granted. We have to keep making the choice to turn away from self and turn to God.

This is, in part, what Advent is for, and why we hear about John the Baptist twice during the season before we finally get around to talking about Mary. We are making ourselves ready for the one who will save us, for the one who will baptize us with his own breath and remake us into something new. We are preparing the way for Jesus, and making the path straight into our hearts. Listen to God’s messenger, who may be the only voice crying out about God in the wilderness of today’s world. Listen and get ready. One day at a time.

Amen.