

The Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 5:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

At Rotary Club recently I sat next to John Teas, one of the owners of Teas Nursery here in Houston. John is an expert horticulturist and often gives me free gardening advice. After we had chatted a while, I told him that several members of our church insist that they talk to their plants to make them grow. I told how Norma Anderson once put a lazy houseplant next to the cutting board in her kitchen. Then she chopped up a head of lettuce while instructing the plant that if it didn't shape up and grow, the same thing would happen to it. Within a week that plant began to produce new leaves.

John listened carefully and, much to my surprise, he nodded in agreement. He then told me similar stories of how he had seen plants respond to human speech and action. He said his father would often go into the orchard with a baseball bat and strike sharply the trunk of any fruit tree that wasn't bearing fruit. In almost every case that tree would bear abundant fruit the next year. John said that not only was such behavior therapeutic for his father, but it worked on the tree—and for sound scientific reasons. When a tree feels threatened with destruction, it throws all its energy into growth and reproduction. Plants *are* affected by human speech and behavior, he said. Sometimes it takes trauma to shock them into growing again.

In today's Gospel John the baptizer came on the scene in the wilderness of Judea, preaching a stern message of the need for repentance. He was a severe man, wearing a scratchy, camel hair garment and a leather girdle and eating locusts and wild honey. People flocked to hear him. But instead of greeting them with words of hospitality, he shocked them by calling them a brood of vipers. He chided them for relying on their Hebrew ancestry as though it excused them from mercy and righteousness in their own time. He attacked their sense of special privilege and complacency, and warned them of the judgment and destruction that was coming soon. "Even now," he told them, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

John did not go around murdering people who didn't follow the Torah. He did not throw rocks through their windows at night with

messages of warning attached to them. He did not take the law into his own hands or presume to be God. But he did try to shock the people out of their complacency. Much the way John Teas's father hit lazy fruit trees with a baseball bat, John the baptizer hit people with the threat of judgment in the hope that they would shape up and start growing again. John the baptizer tried to traumatize the fruitless trees of his people so they would throw their energy once more into bearing fruit that befit their calling as the People of God.

History is filled with stories about how enemies find themselves becoming friends when confronted with the threat of death. I have an old book of anecdotes about a soldier's life in the Union Army during the Civil War. There are a number of stories that tell of times after fierce battles when the wounded and dying were strewn about the battlefield. Soldiers who had tried to kill each other only hours earlier now comforted one another and spoke words of Christian hope as death approached. The imaginary glory of battle didn't produce repentance, but the trauma of pain and death did. The threat of judgment shocked the soldiers into bearing at last the fruits that befit repentance. They found in the end a kind of peace and reconciliation that no amount of fighting could achieve.

Much of our society is deeply moved and pleased by the liberation now coming to Communist countries in Europe and Asia. And yet it is people over age thirty who are moved most of all. There are numerous accounts of high school students in our country who are bored by all the television coverage of the rallies in city squares, the breaching of the Berlin Wall, and the meeting of Mikhail Gorbachev with the Pope in Rome. "What's the big deal?" these young people ask. They do not understand, because they have not experienced the crisis of curtailed freedom and oppression.

Those of us who remember Europe before the Berlin Wall know what it means for people to come to the end of a dictatorship and find their freedom restored. Those of us who remember the monolithic idolatry of Communism that characterized many of these countries find relief in the repentance the leaders are now showing as a result of the uprising of the people against oppression. Trauma often produces fruit. In this case the trauma of thousands of protesters is producing the fruit of freedom and democratization.

The question, of course, is what happens after the trauma passes. Trees hit with a baseball bat this year bear fruit next year, but what about the year after that? In 1965 I marched in Montgomery, Alabama, to promote the right of black people to register and vote. Yet

in the years afterward registration and voter turnout among blacks did not increase very much. Human motivity can be catalyzed by traumatic events, but often when the trauma has passed, motivity fades and complacency sets in.

The same thing is true today just as it was in the time of John the baptizer. The threat of judgment causes repentance for a time, but when the threat is past, repentance ceases as well. If that were not the case, then we would be gathered here today to worship John the baptizer instead of Jesus. John prepared the way, of course, but the fruit of his preaching of trauma did not last. Threats get old and wear out after a while. Just ask any child whose parents keep saying, "You'd better be good or Santa Claus won't bring you anything for Christmas." The threat grows stale because the child knows better. So do the parents.

The threat of judgment may be necessary at times, but there is a better way. The better way is to convert people not by threats from without, but by promises from within. The better way is to set people on a new path in life by creating within them a new covenant with God and neighbor, a covenant written on their hearts. The better way is to bring about repentance not by threatening fiery destruction but by kindling fire within their very souls. The repentance brought about by John the baptizer did not last very long. Sometimes you have to hit a fruitless tree with a bat to wake it up. But for the tree to continue to bear fruit requires not annual beatings, but year-round cultivation. What is needed is not threats from without but promises from within. And those promises are given to us by Jesus Christ.

Every human being is created in the image of God. That doesn't mean we look like God, but rather that we are made in accordance with the image God had for us from the beginning. We exist not by accident but by the will of God. We therefore have within us a primal relationship to our creator, whether we are conscious of it or not. Further, we all have a corresponding will to live according to the pattern of existence God has in mind for us. Yet we do not live that way. Not one of us is as fully human as God intends us to be. Our lives are strewn with the debris of willful neglect, wasted abilities, and squandered goodness. In other words, we are sinners.

But God intends that we be redeemed, and when we take God's will to redeem us seriously, we repent and accept that redemption. Whatever chokes our lives is overcome and we are set free to grow. Whatever oppresses us is banished by the grace of God, and we are

liberated. The millstones around our neck from the past are transformed into stepping stones for the future. Sin never goes away completely, but it is overcome through God's redemptive love for us in Jesus Christ. And the overcoming of sin writes a new covenant on our hearts, so that we are no longer motivated by external trauma alone, but more and more by the internal promise of God that we are indeed accepted, valued, and loved forever.

In the final portion of today's Gospel, John tells about the coming of the Christ, who will separate the grain from the chaff with the winnowing fork of his judgment. Surely John saw the grain as good people and the chaff as bad people. But is that how Jesus saw it? We can't be sure, but there is another way of interpreting the grain and the chaff that is more consistent with Jesus' teaching. Within each of us there is both grain and chaff. Might it not be that judgment day for us is when our Lord receives unto himself that in us which is good and banishes that which is bad? Might it not be that judgment day is not so much to be feared as yearned for as that day when the chaff that clogs our life is finally removed from us and we are set free to be the cherished and valuable ones we are?

There are many times in life when we receive blows that traumatize us into temporary repentance. But in Jesus Christ we receive not a blow but a gift in the form of a man born among us—a man who came to be like us in order that we might become like him, fruitful here and now and fruitful unto eternal life.

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