

Advent 2 (Peace) Year C: 8 /9 December 2018
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“The work of living into our baptismal promises is difficult but not impossible, for it is made possible through the grace of God, which is a purifying fire.”

Malachi 3: 1-4
Philippians 1: 3-11
Luke 3: 1-6
Canticle 16

In the cinematic adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which chronicles the life of the Bennet family – comprising of the father, mother and five daughters, whom the mother is constantly plotting to marry off to wealthy suiters – there is a scene where Mr. Bingley (suiter to the eldest daughter, Jane) is coming unawares to Longbourn (the Bennet family home). His intention is to propose to Jane. The scene is one where we see Mrs. Bennet lolling around on a sofa eating her bonbons while the various daughters are hither and tither around the room doing various activities. The room, one can say, is basically “very lived in.” That is until a household servant announces that Mr. Bingley has arrived unexpectedly. The frenzied activity and general mayhem that ensues as the ladies set about arranging the room and themselves in a more presentable manner is quite humorous. Everything disappears behind pillows, in drawers, with chairs being moved about, all in an effort to impress their unexpected guest. I can relate to this story, as I am sure most of us have been caught in similar fashion where we are unprepared for the unannounced guest.

Preparing for a guest is very much on the mind of John, son of Zachariah, also known as the baptizer. In his quoting of Isaiah to his audience, John is imparting a message of hope, that the time approaches for the promised restoration of God's covenant. That there is one coming who will set the captives free, who will bring justice to the people and the land ushering in a time of peace. But they must be ready; they must prepare. At the core of John's message is the idea of *metanoia* – of changing one's mind or outlook, of turning away from that which causes sin and suffering. The prophetic voice once again warns of judgement while offering the chance

to turn back to God who is the fountain and source of all blessing. However, John warns, this will entail genuine repentance.

This is not simply window-dressing spirituality. This is not about going to the local bookstore, pulling the newest title from the spirituality section and thinking that reading it will suffice. This is not about intellectualism nor is it about learning a new spiritual practice. Though it entails our hearts and minds, it's the soul that John the Baptist is speaking about. Preparing one's soul to receive the Light of Heaven, God's ultimate gift of grace: The Word Incarnate. There is no simple way to prepare for this, but prepare we must, and the Baptist calls us to such awareness.

The spirituality that John is preaching is one that concerns the conversion of the heart. It's about an altered reality that subsumes cultural ideologies and transforms them into acts of righteousness. When John speaks of the valleys being filled, the mountain tops being laid low and the crooked made straight, he is not speaking about things staying the same. Things will look different. Things will be different when God's reign is ushered in through God's messiah. This is a wonderful message of hope to a land that is shrouded in darkness and despair. John's message is one that offers the hearer a genuine opportunity for repentance through baptism. And it is there we must start to look in order to prepare our soul for the spiritual gift of the Eternal Word, Christ Jesus. Do we abide in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles through the breaking of bread or do we deny and obstruct the table from those in most need?

How often do we by-pass the person in need of sustenance? During my time living Toronto, it was common to see panhandlers asking for a handout. Each street corner had individuals seeking food or shelter. Many slept on the street wrapped in cardboard for warmth during the winter months. At first I was giving what I could to those who asked, but over time I became blind to their plight as it caused stress on my own very limited resources. The table of the Lord is not only found in a building called a church. It is found on the streets and byways of life. What I failed to do was recognize the systemic problem of a capitalist society that manufactures poverty and hunger; a system that rewards those who already have by exploiting the vulnerable. In today's age, there are many who work two jobs, are paying down crippling student debt, and live with little to no health care. Are we, who are baptized followers of Christ, unwilling to be discomforted so others who have little may live with dignity? Do we try to resist evil and sin or through gossip and innuendo foster further discord?

Oh, how I love to whine. How I love to stress over the pettiness of small minded people and their passive-aggressive behavior, their desire to control, their drive for power. Tabloids fill the stands at every check-out lane. Who is manipulating whom? An inquiring society wants to know. Misinformation is rooted throughout our media. We clamor for news that supports our own biased opinions. How we, as a society, love to tear one another down to bolster our own egos. As a disciple of Christ, are we unwilling to be wrong? To admit our opinion is causing another pain and suffering? Are we so fragile that we cannot admit we are power hungry at the expense of the meek? Do we proclaim through our words and actions the Good News of salvation or are we nurturing our own egos and pride?

Getting recognition for achievements is so edifying, it's like an intoxicant - once you experience it, you want more. Getting attention makes one popular and oh how I yearn to be like the popular kids. I want to shine and be recognized with accolades; to hang diplomas on my wall and have friends fawn over whatever skill or talent I am excelling at. As a follower of Christ, do we see those on whose shoulders we stand, on whose hand we stepped upon climbing up the ladder of success? Are we serving the least among us or are we exploiting our neighbor for our own profit?

Having the latest gadget is thrilling, the newest technology exhilarating. I want the status symbol to let my neighbors know how well I am doing. I want to prove to others I have arrived. The culture is swimming in market highs and tycoons are flush with profit. I want my share and I'll get any way I can. Pride is a dangerous thing as it doesn't allow for us to share our privilege with others. In fact, we want to deny others what we have in surplus. As we walk in Jesus' steps, are we aware of the broken lives our greed has created? Do we live in accord with creation or do we only see nature as something to subjugate?

Commercialism sells me a bill of goods - I can acquire whatever I want at whatever time of year it is. I can walk into any grocery store and find such a variety of staples and goods such that I have an abundance of choices. I leave my heated/air conditioned car and enter a building likewise temperately controlled. I can purchase clothing in any shape or size or color I want. I have closets and cupboards filled with goods and yet it isn't enough. There are storage sheds to hold all the over flow and yet we go out and acquire more. Jesus asks of us, his friends and disciples, do we see how our gluttony causes those whose labor and lands produce this bounty to go without, to be paid slave wages, to devastate fragile eco-systems?

Our baptismal covenant is essentially what God is seeking to restore. God is restoring Israel's covenant, yes, but God is also restoring our baptismal covenant as well. The work of living into our baptismal promises is difficult but not impossible, for it is made possible through the grace of God, which is a purifying fire.

This purifying fire, tests and tempers our souls. It burns away that which causes decay and death. Like simmering a liquid to condense its flavor, this purifying fire is a spiritual reduction that brings forth our essential goodness. It burns away our acquisitiveness, our materialism, our indifferences and allows us to live more fully into our baptismal promises. We, on our own accord, cannot do this. God must act, and so God does, for God alone is the faithful one.

I want to see things be as God intended. I am sure you do too. Yet we resist because we don't want to be discomforted by the change God's reign entails. Change in behavior, change in attitude. We don't want to give anything up. John the Baptist, however, is calling us to an earnest repentance, to *metanoia*. Calling us to turn away from that which fosters discord and disharmony and to open our hearts and soul to the love of God. To live fully into our baptismal life requires a spiritual purification and only God's love can provide the necessary means to temper our desires. On this second Sunday of Advent, the prophets invite us to serious soul searching and honest repentance so that we may prepare to receive the Light of Heaven – the Incarnate Word – Christ Jesus. That is the guest we are preparing to receive and the servant of the Lord is announcing that the arrival is upon us. Therefore, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his pathway.