

SPG#148, Advent 3A

December 16, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

The Year A lectionary readings for Advent are somewhat different than years B or C because we get two looks at the forerunner, John the Baptizer. Last week we heard about John's preaching as he moved up and down the Jordan River, baptizing those who would believe his message of preparing the way of the Lord. We heard about how he was dressed in camel hair and ate locusts. We heard about how he called the Pharisees a "brood of vipers." I shared with you about his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

When Zechariah questioned an angel about the unlikely birth of a baby to his older wife, Elizabeth, he was struck mute, but after the birth, regained his speech. Later, when pregnant Mary, the mother of Jesus, visited pregnant Elizabeth, the mother of John, the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb.

Bruce Chilton, in his book, Rabbi Jesus, re-tells the story of John in the 3rd chapter. Chilton expands the story and implies that Jesus' contact with John was much more extensive and formative than we usually allow. Chilton says that Jesus would have eaten the locusts and honey that all of John's followers ate as a way of initiating himself into their group. He also says that Jesus would have dressed as John's followers dressed in camel hair garments. He says that Jesus would have initially been known in John's group as a novice. But as time went on Jesus' status would have evolved into where he was actually competing with John in influence. There would come a time then when it made more sense for Jesus to strike out on his own than remain with John. And there would come a time when John would realize that part of his calling as forerunner was finally to decrease his visibility so that the visibility of Jesus would increase. So the story of John is inseparably linked to the story of Jesus. And the whole meaning of John's story is founded in the interplay between Jesus and John as individuals.

That brings us then to today's gospel in Matthew. John is in prison because of his statements condemning the immoral practices of the ruler, Herod Antipas.

From prison he has heard of Jesus' activities on his own, his healings, his teachings. And from prison he sends to Jesus a question. It was the question that he had lived with day and night when Jesus began rising in prominence. The question was, **Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?** Jesus replied by saying, **Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.**

So Jesus in essence says, "Yes, I am the one." Such hudsba! And yet his hudsba does not sound arrogant. For he simply tells the messenger to go and tell what is seen and heard. And for that matter John exhibited similar hudsba when he began teaching and baptizing. Who told him it was OK to baptize people? And who told him to start teaching? The church had not been formed. And there were no Bishops running things then. There came a time for both John and Jesus that they finally just said,

"I am who I am, and I will do what I am to do."

So the story of John the Baptizer and Jesus is a story of purpose and calling. And it is a story of being ardently faithful to that purpose and calling. It is a story about having the courage to be openly who one is. But finally, in being faithful to the calling, it is about letting go of who you were called to be to follow a calling into less prominence.

After Jesus answered John's question from prison, he said to the crowds about John,

What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

And so Jesus had high praise for John in his prominence, in his being noticeable. But he also referred to his giving all of that up to be faithful to a call that supersedes the call to prominence. Or as John said last week, **I must decrease so that he may increase.**

The basic themes that rise in the story of John the Baptizer are written all over human life. As we grow up in our homes with our parents, there comes a time when we go away to camp for the first time, a time when we leave home for the first time, a time when we support ourselves in this world for the first time. We believe those who care for us when they say there will come a time when you will take care of yourself. Then we become adults and assume an increased autonomy. And often in our adult lives we find ourselves caring for others, perhaps children, perhaps employees who are on their way to more autonomy, more prominence. Adults then get used to being in charge. We get used to that power, that autonomy. But there comes a time when that autonomy begins to slip. And we find that because of health reasons or otherwise our prominence and our autonomy decreases with age. And in that decrease, we find others caring for us, just as when we were children.

Some of these transitions from dependence to autonomy actually wind up being celebrations of growth and progress. But some of the transitions from autonomy to dependence can be very very difficult.

But even on a smaller scale, we find that as individuals we face the decision many times of what next to embrace and what next to let go. And so I ask you, Is there anything this Advent that you need to embrace but never have? And is there anything this Advent that you need to release but never have?

In the church, when you are young, we will teach you, care for you, encourage you, and love you. And when you are more autonomous we will rely on your strength, your energy, your dependability. And when you are weak and less autonomous, we will visit you and love you and honor you. Why? Because we should? Yes. And because the etiquette of Christ is written on our lives from birth until death.

And so it is that life is a series of embraces and releases that finds us more or less prominent, more or less autonomous, more or less independent, more or less dependent. In our strength and our prominence, in our waking, and in our resting, hopefully, we are preparing the way for the One who is to come. And in our weakness and dependence, in our waking and in our resting we are decreasing so that he may increase. May the spirit of the forerunner teach us about being independent and dependent.

And may all our strength and all our weakness be in Christ. Amen.