

What do you expect?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2016.

Jesus answered them, "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." Matthew 11:4-5

The rose colored candle in our Advent wreath reminds us that this is referred to as Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin "to rejoice" that was the introit in the old Latin Mass. On this Sunday the penitential nature of Advent is lifted to emphasize a sense of hopeful expectation. This is also known as 'stir-up' Sunday because of the opening collect in which we pray that God's power may be stirred up in us. The challenge of this season is to gain insight into the meaning of Advent and Christmas beyond the recollection of our memories as children. The fast pace of this season can distract us from this as a time for renewed hope to bring out the potential for good in all of us.

The people of ancient Palestine longed for a savior to restore a sense of hope and identity for the future of their nation. They looked for someone to realize their dreams as a people of God. Because they had strayed from keeping God at the center of their lives, it would take a nationwide act of repentance to bring them back to their unique role as a people through whom the whole world would be redeemed.

John the Baptist as the harbinger of this new hope serves as the advance man for the coming of Christ. He is a prophet challenging the people to repent and convert to a whole new way of life. When John's dynamic personality leads them to think that he is the Messiah, he points beyond himself to the coming of him who is greater than he who will take away the sins of the world.

John's brusque and fiery challenge lands him in prison, preventing him from seeing the effects of Jesus' ministry. Though they are cousins, the two are a contrast in personalities. Jesus emphasizes forgiving rather than condemning. He is more about light than darkness, more about compassion than judgment. He is the revelation of God's merciful and loving nature characterized by teaching love and forgiveness.

By contrast, John breathes the fire of judgment as he warns the people of the wrath to come. In the isolation of his prison cell, he experiences doubts and sends his disciples to find out if Jesus is really the one who is coming to save them, or if they should look for another. Jesus realizes that John has had a blind spot while languishing in prison and asks his inquirers to see for themselves the acts of healing and mercy: 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. (Matthew 11:4-5)

To those who are mystified by the nature of John and his mission, Jesus asks if they were expecting a spineless, soft-spoken type who could be shaken by every changing wind. Were they expecting someone dressed in fine robes living in an elaborate gold plated palace? If they were expecting a prophet, he is far more than that.

John the Baptist's call to repentance in his time is the same call for us in our present time. The message is clear: we all have the capacity to be more compassionate people who are responsive to the needs of the world. We must never pack away the essential quality of compassion as if it were a gift we didn't want and can't use. Instead, we must use it every day in every way we can.

During this joyful Advent season, there are those aren't feeling the joy who are sad and depressed. Therapists find their calendars crowded with appointments with those who suffer various forms of seasonal affective disorder. Our faith has a way of faltering in the darkness of depression in what is supposed to be a season of light. Advent and Christmas bring different expectations for different people, some of which are not always met. At various points in our lives we pause and ask what we are expecting when we don't feel the way we hoped we would.

This Advent season can transform the heart of even the most rigid and selfish personality into one who is willing to be kind and generous. In this season of giving, the most depressed and least emotive person can risk the vulnerability of allowing a warmer, more compassionate side to emerge. Just as God broke through the human condition to come to us in Christ, God breaks through our emotional barriers to bring out a more compassionate self.

I don't have to tell you what a fast paced world this is. We network relationships with easy access to anyone anywhere, yet we find ourselves isolated from those closest to us. Social media allows us to express our opinions openly and freely with anyone, whether or not we agree with them. It is all too easy to delete people out of our lives as if they were no more than a word or an image on a screen.

Every year at this time there are news accounts of heartwarming acts of kindness to those who go without. Acts of kindness need not be limited to this season, but ought to be part of our ongoing life together by those of faith or with little or no faith.

How we use the great gift of the sacred in a consumer society is up to each of us. With all the giving and receiving of gifts, remember that the most important thing we can give is the gift of ourselves. It is by God's grace that our eyes are opened to our potential to be more loving and forgiving. It is by God's grace that our ears are unstopped to become better listeners. It is by God's grace that when we fall flat on our face we get up and go on.

Herein lies the crux of the story: it is always darkest before the dawn. We know how the story of the newborn Christ child turns out. We know what those early disciples of Jesus did not know. We know that Judas will betray him, that Peter will deny him and that the disciples will flee in fear. We know that the story does not end in darkness, but continues in the light of resurrection driving out fear, sadness and isolation. Were it not for the cross, there could be no crown. We are the people who walk in the light of hope and promise. Don't forget that.

Be part of the unending story that continues to give hope and encouragement. A prayer in the New Zealand Prayer Book adapted from the Hindu tradition speaks of the capacity for hope in all of us:

Lead me from death to life,
from falsehood to truth;
Lead me from despair to hope,
from fear to trust;
Lead me from hate to love,
from war to peace.
Let peace fill our heart,
our world, our universe.

New Zealand Prayer Book, (page 164)