

The urgency of Advent

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Isaiah 11:2

On a recent visit to New York City I visited the school where my son teaches in lower Manhattan. I sat in on one of his classes in which the subject of the day was world religions. One of his students, who is Jewish, said that he learned about John the Baptist in Hebrew School. He said he thought that John the Baptist was the founder of Christianity. In a way, I can see why he thought that. John the Baptist is the forerunner and herald of Christ and closely resembles the Old Testament prophets who preached an urgent message of repentance. John the Baptist stands firmly in the prophetic tradition preaching both repentance and hope.

Saint Matthew describes John the Baptist as the fulfillment of the voice of the prophet heralding the coming of the Savior. He is a true ascetic who lives in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair and subsisting on a diet of locusts and wild honey. He has no need for all the trappings of modern day leaders who influence our economic and social life. He is free of anything that would hinder his urgent message of calling God's people to repentance. John baptizes with water as he proclaims the coming of the one who will baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

The early Christian community believed that Christ would return in their own lifetime. Over the centuries there have been those who viewed catastrophic events of their time as signs of the end of the age. The reality is that we run the risk of bringing the end on ourselves with powerful weapons of destruction. In every age there have been those who see signs of the apocalypse. One of their bumper stickers reads: "Jesus is coming, look busy."

Jesus warns of false prophets and demagogues who try to distract us with the threat of impending doom. In arming ourselves against their threat to our security, we run the risk of bringing on our own destruction. We have lived through many perilous times marked by a clash of cultural and religious values between the East and West, between the Arab/Muslim and Christian cultures. Sadly, the causes of so many of the world's conflicts are ultimately over intense and extreme differences of religion.

In a world torn asunder by hatred and violence, we are called to be instruments of God's truth, justice and reconciliation. Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote about the ubuntu- an African ideal that describes how our own wellbeing depends upon the health and happiness of others. He challenges us to see everyone as brothers and sisters in the family of God, especially those who are different from us. In breaking down racial barriers in his native South Africa, Bishop Tutu was convinced that God brings healing and reconciliation in the most desolate and chaotic situations. Our task in this age is to make way for God to be at the center of our midst by advocating equality and justice for all people.

We may be divided by ideology, we may disagree on how to go about it, but we all have the mandate to work together for the common good and for a safer world. The world is caught in the tension between those who are passionate about defending their beliefs who come at their objectives from different paths. Retribution and revenge never solve. The right of the Jewish people to live in the land of their heritage must not be at the expense of the same right of Arab and Christian Palestinians to live in what is also the land of their heritage.

With the passing of Fidel Castro, we hope for a better life for the people of Cuba who have lived under repressive regimes for generations. The Cuban people lived under a dictatorship before Castro took over in January 1959. The ill fated and disastrous attempt at the invasion of Cuba in 1960 only made matters worse. The U.S. found itself at the brink of a nuclear exchange during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. The embargo designed to exert pressure against the repressive government has done little but hinder the economy. On a mission trip to Cuba some years ago, I saw first hand the negative effects of a totalitarian form of government. Though they have a high literacy rate and reasonably good health care system, their once beautiful buildings are in decay with people driving around in pre-1959 vintage cars.

While this Advent season is about repentance, it is also a time of hope. We live in a state of readiness to be delivered from the political and moral confusion that characterizes our present age. The prophet Isaiah tells of the coming of a savior in which he wrote: The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (Isaiah 11:2) If the prophet of old has anything to tell our own generation, it is to turn the weapons of war into tools of peace. Rather than to assume that God is on our side, we must always be sure that we are on God's side.

In the midst of world tension there are signs of hope. When you think about it, for every act of evil, and every atrocity committed against someone, there are ongoing acts of kindness and generosity every day many of which go unnoticed. There is a sense of true compassion deep down inside of us reaching out in thoughtful, kind and helpful ways. True compassion gives of itself unconditionally, placing the concerns of others before our own.

What this Advent seasons reminds us is that no matter what happens, God's love for us prevails. Nothing in this world can take that away from us. Nothing that happens to us or that we bring on ourselves will be able to separate us from the love of God. God loves each and every one of us as if there were only one of us to love, but we cannot expect God to save us from ourselves. We are responsible for our own actions. Our repentance depends our conversion; otherwise it has no meaning.

During this Advent season, we pray for a resolution of national and international conflicts, for our elected leaders, and especially for the safety and protection of our men and women in the armed forces in harm's way. As Christians, we are committed to being makers of peace and we have the capability to make this hope a reality. The alternative is defeatism, despair and hopelessness. As a people of hope we do all we can to work for peace and reconciliation by heeding the voice of the prophet calling us to prepare the way for the coming of the Savior. Upon him the Holy Spirit endowed wisdom and understanding to give hope to the poor and downtrodden.

That hope can be a reality, but it has to begin from within, from deep down inside each of us.