

Sermon
Advent Two—C
St. Andrew's, Methuen
December 5, 2021
William Bradbury

Baruch 5:1-9
Canticle 16
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

A hundred years ago many Christians were raised to think of their beliefs as a series of theological assertions strung together like Christmas tree lights, so that if you take out one light, like, say the Virgin Birth, the whole string of lights goes dark.

Therefore, fifty years ago many Christians were raised to have platitudes, instead of beliefs, so we can show our neighbors how modern and inoffensive we are.

But the good news isn't first of all a set of theological assertions that we just believe in our heads nor is it Hallmark card that creates lukewarm and ineffective churchgoers who have lost the fierce urgency of Jesus to change the world.

By contrast, Luke describes how much the world needs to change: he first names the vicious and vainglorious Tiberius Caesar and his administrative minions Pontius Pilate, King Herod Antipas, and his brothers who implement Rome's destructive rule.

Then he names the High Priest Caiaphas and his father-in-law Annas who turn the temple into a den of thieves to please their Roman overlords.

These brutal leaders are beating down the people, not building the Realm of God.

Luke's good news, therefore, is the story of how God appears in this broken world in Jesus, who is the New Being, in order to transform and transcend the oppressive status quo.

The problem, however, isn't just that Tiberius and his minions are bad leaders, which they are, it is that human civilization is maintained through violent and oppressive systems built to keep the powerful in power. Certainly, an

enlightened emperor, like philosopher-King Marcus Aurelias, is better than a sadistic one, like Nero, but the whole system is set up to keep the few in power and to subvert justice and peace for everyone else.

The guy in charge of housing in the City of Atlanta in 1950 may think he doesn't have a racist bone in his body, but as he serves the racist system of redlining that forces Black and Brown folks to live only in poor neighborhoods, then the result is racist nonetheless.

 Then Luke goes on to say, into this violent world "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness and John went into the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

But we might well ask how confessing one's sins in a river or baptismal font could possibly have an impact on the corrupt system being run out of Washington, Atlanta, and Boston.

*But strange as it sounds, God has been transforming the world, **not through violent power, but through the radical transformation of the human heart.** God's plan is to make it possible for human beings to be peaceful, not violent; to be forgiving, not retaliatory; and **to love our neighbor enough to change the systems that oppress our neighbors.***

Jesus comes as the New Being, in union with God, to birth the New Creation project.

God's work does not wait until one great end time cataclysm, but uses the slow evolution of human consciousness under the impact of the Spirit of Jesus, the human face of God.

That means every one of us is necessary for God's realm to appear. Therefore, John calls every one of us to repent of our sins, and to step into the new life grounded in God.

To do this means we must let go of our past. We will not be able to join Jesus in the process of New Creation, if we continue to live in the prison of our past.

 Here's an image that helps me see the importance of repentance:

I've mentioned before this image from poet David Whyte: He says when we're born, we're given a tiny black bag into which we put our sins, regrets, and grievances. So by the time we're 40 or 50 we

are dragging through life an enormous bag that extends 50 yards behind us.

This is the bag John the Baptist calls us to drop. We drop the bag on one shore, go under the waters of baptism as a sign of having died to our past, and then leave by way of the other shore, free at last, free to follow Jesus into Christ's new way of being human.

Jesus, also, calls us out of the past: remember his farming metaphor: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and **looks back** is fit for the kingdom of God." And he says to the man who wants to leave in order to go bury his father, "let the dead bury their own dead."

He isn't telling us not to attend our parents' funerals. Rather he is telling us we can't follow Jesus while we are dragging our black bag filled with regret and grievance over how we treated our parents and how they treated us.

Professor and Franciscan sister Ilia Delio puts it this way: "**Jesus consistently states that nostalgia or regret will thwart the unfolding reign of God.**" The Emergent Christ, page 109

John and Jesus are calling for radical inner change so there can be radical outer change.

Repentance is what happens to people when they are taken out of their habitual, ordinary mind and moved into the higher mind, the consciousness of Christ, that sees the unity of all people in God.

=====

In C.S. Lewis' The Last Battle, one of the Narnia Chronicles, The dwarfs are unwilling to accept the freedom Aslan offers them. Aslan the Lion says, "They will not let us help them. **They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.**" The Last Battle

What if the Realm of God is an evolutionary process that began at the Big Bang, manifested in Jesus, and is continuing today in you and me?

We can see signs of this evolution when Slavery ends, when women are given the right to vote, and when Gays and Lesbians are given the right to marry.

But we can also see that systemic racism still exists; and women don't receive the same wage for the same work as men; and that LGBT+ folks continue to be discriminated against every

day. We see the systems of this world continue to oppress the last, the least, and the lost in order to maintain their power.

So the Word of God comes to us to give up our platitudes, drop our black bags, and daily surrender to the evolutionary transformation and transcendence of Christ.