

Fruit for the Journey -- Advent 2A

“You brood of vipers!” Wow; who wants to be called that? Especially when we’re all snugly and wassailly getting ready for Christmas. What is John the Baptist doing, and why are we bidden to talk about it now? Well, John was doing some preaching, some prophetic preaching. So convenience and comfort were not big concerns for him. Prophetic preaching: John was illuminating the present and announcing the future, which is what Advent is all about, and always has been. A star in the night sky, and the light of the world. Jesus, a baby in a stable manger, and Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man, the Child of God, who will overcome death forever. Christ with us, and Christ to come: illuminating the present and announcing the future. And like a good preacher, John talks about the current situation. He makes sure that practical connections to contemporary life run parallel to and become interwoven with his larger story of God’s grace. Again, we are given the answers, so that we can face the questions.

Now John is not an easy fellow to enjoy. In the vibrant language of the King James Bible this scene runs thusly: “And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. He said, ‘I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire’”

I don’t know about you, but the outfit doesn’t sound all that appealing. And I think I would run out of honey long

before I had polished off all them locusts. But the description solidifies our picture of a prophetic preacher whose loyalty is not to worldly power; whose concerns are not for worldly approval. He is a wild man. His words must be important, because his social skills certainly are not. Although this may be a good indication in the Bible, it does not hold true in American politics. The exciting part of his message is to announce the arrival of a figure who will baptize the willing with Holy Ghost power so transformative that it feels like fire.

John speaks of the same figure – a shoot from the stump of Jesse -- whom Isaiah describes, one who will embody all that is good. This is the one the God of steadfastness and encouragement sent – became really -- to teach us how to live in harmony with one another. Paul admonishes the Romans, “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” This of course includes the prophecy of Isaiah, who points out that broods of vipers will no longer pose a threat: “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy anything on my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Mind you, if our young friend Owen Baker were here, he could attest that although vipers may or may not pose a metaphysical threat anymore, existentially they are still very dangerous!

But what is John concerned about here? What is the wrath to come? “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We

have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." In other words, don't think that you are entitled to any special treatment because of your lineage, your parentage, your race, your money, your smarts. What matters is who you yourself become. Here is Meister Eckhart: "The eternal birth which God bore and bears unceasingly in eternity is now born in time, in human nature. St. Augustine says this birth is always happening. But if it does not happen in me, what does it profit me? What matters is that it happen in me."

God does not lie in wait sharpening an axe to cut down trees that don't bear good fruit. This mortal life cuts us all down eventually on the physical plane. But our baptism by the Spirit of John's 'One who will come' inspires us to ask ourselves each day – each moment when necessary – whether the fruit we are bearing is as good as we can make it. If we accept and embrace this facility; this discipline, then no failure, no defeat, no disappointment can ever rob us of our good fruit. Jesus said, "In the world you shall have tribulation but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." The only way we can be destroyed -- cut down and thrown into the fire forever -- is by denying this, God's truth: Make justice your sacrifice and trust in the Lord and you shall have greater joy than those who have an abundance of corn and new wine.

I just got back from several days with my parents in St Louis, the city of my birth. It has been a tough year for them. Dad is pushing 92 and not too sprightly, but he still gets around. And he remains wise, charitable, loving and

the great raconteur we've always known. And when he is gone, he will still be all those things to us and to God. A good man. A man of faith. Mom too has always enjoyed strong faith; she taught us to rely on it as the foundation of all we might seek to do. She now has advancing Alzheimer's symptoms: cognitive impairment, memory loss, occasionally volatile irrationality, etc., but still knows us all and loves our company, good humor, food, movies and going to church. If we thought of her great qualities as gone, the loss might be too much to bear; she had a lot going on for a long time. Awarded her doctorate in 1959 with three kids at home and one more on the way, her published work includes such catchy titles as this one: *Exposure of Ribonucleic Acid at Both Ends of Tobacco Mosaic Virus by Extensive Protein Stripping*. Or this, recently optioned by Warner Brothers for a miniseries: *Cell-free Translation of Adenovirus 2 E1a- and E1b-specific mRNA's and Evidence that E1a-related Polypeptides Are Produced from E1a-E1b Overlapping mRNA*. Civic leader, charitable volunteer, athlete, professor, campaign speechmaker, beauty; the list is long.

She made a great mom too, teaching us how to fish and garden and fix things, conducting ambitious camping junkets to all the lower 48 in our series of ill-fated station wagons (every time one of us got a driver's license, there went another wagon), pulling our trusty Nimrod tent trailer behind, coming to every hockey game, football game, track meet, concert and theatrical event and driving yours truly to all these merit badge appointments all over the county. You get the idea. She also would occasionally tell the story (when Dad wasn't around) of her soon-to-be

father-in-law's comment after a golf match a month or so before her wedding to Dad in 1949. This was a match in which she defeated all the men. Grandpa said to her: "You keep that up and you'll be about as popular as a skunk at a garden party." One of the few things he was very wrong about.

I reminisce about all this not just to boast about my dashing mother, but also to remind myself of what a good fruit tree she is. Her current illness means nothing in the face of these moments which shall remain alive forever. They remain in our memory and they remain in the very heart of God because her actions were founded in the desire to let her light shine before all that they might see her good works and give the glory to God. That desire is the nature of the child who comes to us from God as God, both forever and in a few weeks' time. To cherish that desire whatever comes is all God asks of us: Be steadfast. Take courage. I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.

So let us keep an undaunted spirit and we shall be upheld. Move away from thoughts of what might befall and life can never defeat us. Cast our thoughts on what we have done well today and what we would like to do better tomorrow. We shall be remembered by all who know us for the faith we brought to the struggles of living. When we are gone and those who knew us are also gone from this world, our hopeful intention will continue to bear fruit and brighten the eyes of God forever. And now, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.