

PASSING THE TORCH
Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-14
John 1:6-8; 19-28
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, December 11, 2011

You've heard me many times recite the old Sunday School formula, "The Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament and the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament." In other words, both the Old and New Testaments are intrinsically linked, two halves of the same whole. The Old Testament sets the stage; the New Testament completes the story. Neither is superior, and both are necessary, you can't have one without the other.

At the same time Christian conviction insists Christ is present in both testaments, maybe hidden in the Old, but fully revealed in the New. John's prologue, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him nothing was made that was made." (John 1:1-3) not only echoes but also fills in the blanks of the first verse of Genesis, "in the beginning...God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1)

In order to really appreciate the ebb and flow of the eternal sacred story from beginning to end, we need to see the Bible as a seamless piece of cloth otherwise we lose sight not only of the big picture but especially the comprehensive narrative of God's love for the world and the people he created in his image.

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, we're reintroduced to John the Baptist, a prophet with one foot in the Old Testament and the other in the New. In a very real sense John the Baptist is the personification of that intrinsic link I spoke of earlier. Here he comes barreling onto the scene with the full force and fury of an Old Testament prophet, suddenly announcing the Divine Paradigm Shift, effectively proclaiming everything that happened before was prologue to what is happening now! God is on the move and up to something big. God's about to birth something new yet totally consistent with his past dealings with his people.

So, be ready to challenge your preconceived notions of God and be prepared to give up your traditional interpretations of scripture. Let your imaginations and beliefs be tested to the limit. Don't be afraid to reconsider your long held opinions and be ready to boldly question your norms. And don't be surprised if God shakes your foundation into rubble so it can be rebuilt into something new, exciting and life-giving.

Even though he makes his appearance in the Gospels some have called John the Baptist the last of the Old Testament prophets. The primary calling of any prophet was to proclaim God's word, to scold, encourage, preach judgment or hope, but always to communicate God's faithfulness and love. These prophets were much more than God's

microphones they were also burdened with God's anguish and frustration when disobedience and injustice became the norm. What's more they bore the full brunt of the people's anger and rejection when they dismissed the prophet's call for repentance. It was a dubious honor being a prophet. Like the Maytag Repairman, prophets were the loneliest guys in town.

John, himself a fierce and zealous prophet, preached the Good News with a seemingly bad temper. It was his job to announce the arrival of the long-expected Messiah, and that the day of Israel's deliverance was near. The nearly 700 year wait was over. Great David's greatest Son was coming to set his people free.

No wonder crowds of people left their towns and villages to trek far into the wilderness to hear John preach and then be baptized. But unlike many of his predecessors, John was preaching to the choir. People wanted to repent and prepare for the Messiah. They didn't mind being called a brood of vipers and were willing to do whatever the Baptist demanded of them. In fact, they begged him to tell them what to do to make themselves worthy.

In reply, John urged them to do justice: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." When tax collectors asked the question John said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And to soldiers he replied, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats...be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:10-14)

John wasn't preaching anything new. Contrary to our present day perception of the Old Testament prophets, they were far from being clairvoyant soothsayers, they were primarily social critics of the contemporary scene. They preached against injustice and greed, corruption in the government and marketplace as well as the upper classes complacent acceptance of poverty in the land brought on by foreclosures. Peace, justice and being faithful were the consistent themes of the prophets and John the Baptist ably carried on the tradition.

But John's mission had a sense of urgency unmatched by his predecessors. The Baptist wasn't only preaching repentance and preparing the way. As the link between the Old and the New, John would be passing the torch. It was the end of one era and the beginning of another because Jesus would soon declare, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

But not everyone was pleased with these spontaneous eruptions of a new age dawning, especially the members of the entrenched religious establishment who "sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem into the wilderness to ask (John) 'Who are you?'" On the surface it appears the rulers of the Temple were hoping John the Baptist was the real deal and the Messiah was on the move! Not true. Here's why.

The Temple was run by the Sadducees, Israel's aristocrats who were wealthy and held powerful positions. Wanting to keep their elite status at all costs, they collaborated

with Rome. Yes, they were priests but they were also corrupt politicians, expert at protecting their turf.

What's more, their religious beliefs were tailor made to keep their power. Unlike Jesus and the Pharisees, the Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (from Genesis to Deuteronomy) as the Word of God excluding I and II Samuel, I and II Kings (which documented the struggle between the prophets and priests) as well as the prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, primarily because in all these writings the religious establishment was always portrayed in a bad light. Why? The prophets stood for truth and justice while the Temple priests always stood for keeping the status quo. The Priests were content keeping the Law of Moses and offering up unblemished lambs for sacrifice, but they had no regard for the common man, except that he pay his annual tax to support the Temple and their luxurious lifestyles.

So when the Sadducees sent Levites and priests from Jerusalem, looking for John in the wilderness asking, "Who are you?" they had an ulterior motive. They were actually spying on John, hoping to dig up dirt to bring back to the Temple. That's why in Matthew's Gospel when John realized there were members of the religious establishment in the crowd, John asked them directly, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Matthew 3:7)

Now what I've given you so far this morning is the historical background, religious trends and cast of characters from 2,000 years ago, which when you think about it can be easily superimposed on our present day situation which really isn't so much different, despite the undeniable cultural, artistic and scientific progress made over the last two thousand years.

But isn't that precisely why Christ was born to die for our sins and be raised to new life, for all our sakes, past, present and future? When we act like a brood of vipers, doesn't it amaze you that God still comes looking for us? When a latter day John the Baptist speaks the truth about our fallen human condition and we ask, "What then should we do?" do we repent, literally do a 180° and change our ways, or do our backs go up, defiantly defending our loathsome dysfunctions because we want to protect the status quo that guarantees our power and position.

Or are we smart enough to realize there are no guarantees, that power and position are an illusion and that fleeing from the "wrath to come" is useless, unless we stop living for ourselves and start living for Christ and his Kingdom.

In the next few weeks, as Christmas draws near, and especially on Christmas Eve, we'll review the stories of those like King Herod who tried to keep Christ from coming, but we'll also hear stories about Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and Wise Men who allowed God to use them to prepare the way.

And whether you realize it or not two thousand years later, you and I are still being asked to choose sides, to be with those preferring the status quo over the Kingdom, or those who repent and not only receive but keep the Good News.

Christ is coming. Be prepared, so you too can choose...wisely.