

Matthew 3:1-12

Prophecy and Peace

I like to watch old Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers movies. Admittedly, they are light on plot but the music and the dancing are great. After all these years and even in black and white they still have an appeal. One explanation of their popularity is that in their day, they were made during the Great Depression, the weight of everyday life was heavy and people went to the movies to escape. Sometimes one appreciates a good song and dance that have no significance beyond themselves. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were good at that. People did not want to be assailed with reality by the plot but to be temporarily delivered from it by the dancing.

Nowadays, the weight of the world is still heavy but in a different way. We are sheltered from it a little by our everyday lives because we have managed enough affluence to live in one of the more peaceful corners of the world. We go to the movies and watch TV to see morality plays, to be presented with the chaos and contradictions of the world distilled and played out in fictions right before our eyes. We let the lives of Gibbs or Frank Reagan or Bones, or Batman for that matter, help us cope with situations that are real but that we rarely know close-up. We invite the weight of the world into our lives in ways that allow us to process it. The

screens are an escape into the real world rather than from it.

The Advent Tradition - Prophecy and Peace

Part of the Advent tradition involves the Hebrew prophets and in the New Testament story, the life of John the Baptist. A few Sundays ago we read in Luke's Gospel the "Song of Zechariah," and learned about John's father's experience around the time of his birth. Today our reading comes from Matthew's Gospel and in it we learn about the movement John led shortly before Jesus came on the scene. We have also read quite a bit from Isaiah so that our understanding of John is seen as an extension of the prophets so that Hebrew prophecy is a strong part of Advent.

Very often, we hear the term "prophet" we think of prognostication, think of one who predicts the future. While there *is* a predictive element in prophecy, It is better to understand it in terms of analysis and interpretation. In this vein, a prophet is one who correctly interprets the times, tells the truth about the way things are. A false prophet gets it all wrong. A good prophet can lay challenges at our feet by forcing us to accept what we want to deny or ignore. Thus we are once again thinking about reality.

Another part of the Advent tradition is the theme of Peace which is often associated with the second Sunday. Peace can be thought of in large terms as the absence of war and strife in the world which is desirable but mostly not universal. Peace can also be thought of on the smaller scale as the absence of anxiety more closer to home and in the personal life; inner peace.

In Advent, the two are brought together, prophecy and peace. The challenge goes out to those who think there can ever be peace without justice, without a truth-telling. There is no such thing as a rigged and dishonest peace that favors and benefits some while neglecting others. The noble and hopeful message of Peace on Earth so much associated with Christmas is accompanied by a challenging prophetic message.

John and the Prophetic Challenge

In those days, we are told, John came preaching. What he preached was a gospel of repentance because heaven was at hand. He was out in the wilderness which raises the question of how he obtained an audience. What were all those people doing out there? Were they city-dwellers on vacation looking for a little peace in the harmony of nature; or boy scouts on a camping trip; or music lovers having a country jamboree? More than likely it is better seen as the way

in their time governments dealt with the problem of homelessness. The people who had nowhere else to go went out into the wilderness. Their presence speaks to the failure of the economic and political systems.

John's message to them was one of great hope. He told them to get their lives together because the "kingdom of heaven" is near. One must have hope if one is to repent. There has to be a reason.

One thinks of athletes in training. Athletes work hard and make sacrifices. They practice. If they are on a team they try to overcome personality differences and be united with teammates. If there is no game day, they will not persist. Furthermore, if there is no hope of victory, they will give up, lose their edge. John was telling a poor and rejected people that the tide was about to turn and their behavior mattered and the content of their hearts mattered. It is a message still relevant today.

Pharisees and Sadducees

Then John saw the religious leaders and pious ones as they showed up to keep an eye on things and make sure nothing got out of hand. His message to them was not nearly so hopeful. He called them a, "brood of vipers." He warned them against thinking they had special status as "Abraham's children." He said that

the nearness of heaven was not going to be good for everyone. He said that the ax was already laid at the root of the trees.

In other words, before there is peace, there is judgement. Everyone must face the truth about themselves and about the world if they are to be healthy. It is a point worth considering. But there is a larger point.

Larger Truth

The larger truth is not exclusively about religious leaders or government officials or ordinary people. It is not about rich and poor, powerful and powerless, black or white, or even Christian and not Christian. The larger truth is about humanity which means it is about all of us. The truth is that we have all been blessed a little and cursed a little, been the victims and the victimizers.

Every one of us wants to be loved and accepted. We all want to overcome the dividedness among us. It makes sense that in order for that victory to happen it must happen to others as well as ourselves. I think we are willing to let that happen if we think that what we gain is more than what we lose.

Perhaps the best way to see it is in terms of the narrow gate that Jesus talked about. When the time comes, you can enter but not with any of your possessions in tow. And not with any of your baggage. It must all be left behind. The gate is big enough for just you. The trappings of earthly life stay here. It is best not to become too attached.

Part of what won't fit through the narrow gate is our possessions; cars and houses and things. Part of what must be left behind is the attitudes; jealousy, malice, anger, resentment, pain and self-pity, hatred. Much of it we don't admit. It must all go.

The message of Advent is that heaven is coming, ready or not, there is no time to mess around. The ax is laid. The fire is lit. Don't get too close with all your garbage because if you do the flames will consume you. But when all *is* left behind the, fire does not consume; it cleanses and purifies, it refines, warms and heals.

The truth of the gospel is that there is no escape from life's contradictions or fictionalizing of them so that we can process them. They must be faced. That is the prophetic challenge. But when that challenge is accepted, not even Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers can imagine the song and dance we will all do together. Because on the other side, there is peace.

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