

2nd Sunday of Advent

Cycle A, 12.4.16

Isaiah 11:1-10/Romans 15:4-9/Matthew 3:1-12

ADVENT IS ABOUT WAITING... GOD WAITING FOR US

There's an expression that gained political currency during the past presidential campaign – a promise to "drain the swamp." Originally the phrase meant "to get rid of malaria-carrying mosquitoes by draining a swamp or any infested medium. Figuratively, 'drain the swamp' came to mean "exterminating something that is harmful" or anything that most people hate, such as corruption or government waste. With many, particularly in rural America, the phrase stuck — popular with those tired of Washington's ways, looking for an end to gridlock in government, hoping for new blood that wasn't beholden to special interests and lobbyists. The swamp referred to those who have been in politics for decades.



I personally find the phrase offensive, expressing a disdain for time-honored institutions and experienced political professionals. But I might have to change my mind after listening to John the Baptist's rant in today's Advent gospel. When he saw the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious professionals and legal experts of his day, he basically called them swamp-dwellers: "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?*" John had the courage and audacity to "call

'em as he saw 'em, as he challenges the priestly aristocracy. While many have thought that the Judean society in first-century Palestine was divided between priests versus people as a whole, the division was actually more between the high priesthood – those elite leaders in Jerusalem – and the people and their ordinary priests – like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, who lived in the outlying villages. Those would have been like folks in "middle America" who feel oppressed and forgotten.

Ironically, their problems weren't so different than today's. The oppression worked upon the people and their ordinary priests by the Jerusalem elite and their Roman patrons took the form of exorbitant taxes, confiscation of ancestral property and chronic food shortages. Eventually, Jesus would take up the mantle of John the Baptist in condemning the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus will say of them: *They tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry. They put them on the shoulders of others, but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.* John proposed an easy solution to rid the people of their oppressors and suggested that the one who was coming after him – the Messiah -- would make short shrift of them. Not "lock them up," but *cut them down and throw them into unquenchable fire.*

Had John not been arrested, thrown in prison and eventually beheaded by order of Herod, he would have encountered a Messiah whose judgment of his own oppressors was tempered by mercy. John's vision differs from Jesus in a significant way. The Baptist sees that the problems of the world are so radical that it's going to take some kind of divine radical solution to solve it. He's waiting for God to descend in a catastrophic event to remedy all things. He envisions Jesus with axe and winnowing fan in hand – ready to chop down, clean house and throw into the fire. Jesus has an entirely

different take on salvation. For him, it's all about the demand that God is making on us -- not us on God. We are commanded to do something about the evil in the world. In an apocalypse, as it were, we are waiting for God. And in this "ethical eschatology" (as the theologians name it) which Jesus came to proclaim, God is waiting for us. That's, I think, what Jesus is talking about in the Kingdom of God. It's a demand for us to do something in conjunction with God. Our repentance must be followed by conversion and conversion by action.

For the past six years, Syria has been torn apart by a lethal combination of civil war and tribal hostilities. To outsiders, there seems to be only villains and refugees. But there are heroes. In October an article in Time Magazine described the "White Helmets": ordinary Syrians - teachers, tailors, builders, doctors - who didn't flee the country and didn't take up arms; instead, they return day after day to the scene of some of the worst carnage on the planet. Known by the distinctive headgear they wear, the White Helmets sift through the rubble of Aleppo looking for survivors. They treat the wounded, work tirelessly to repair and maintain water and electricity, seek to re-unite families separated by the bombings and occupations, and bury the dead.



The White Helmets grew out of a disparate set of local groups scattered throughout Syria. They number more than 3,000 volunteers in rebel-held areas across

the country. They are all civilians - the White Helmets' code of conduct forbids their taking up arms. Members are trained in how to search collapsed buildings, how to put out fires, how to handle unexploded bombs, what to do in the event of a chemical attack. Even militants who had fought in the armed rebellion have laid aside their weapons to join the White Helmets.

Since the White Helmets organized in early 2013, White Helmet units have saved and rescued 60,000 of their fellow Syrians. One hundred forty-one White Helmets have been killed while serving. A war defined by impossible choices and implacable hatreds has also produced a model of heroism that reflects the best of humanity: ordinary people who rush in to help after every attack and bombing that devastates their neighbors and homeland. Their credo is a single verse from the Quran: "*Whoever saves one life, saves humanity.*"

A prophet is "one who proclaims" - and the White Helmets are "prophets" in the truest sense of the word. In their selfless, dangerous work, the ordinary Syrians who wear the White Helmets "proclaim" the justice and mercy of God in the devastation of their homeland. In our own commitment to the moral and ethical principles that are of God, we can be no less prophets of God's love and mercy in the Jordan banks of our own homes, our businesses and our schools. Isaiah's prophecy today offers us a compelling vision of peace: *The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox.* This image of all creation living in harmony gave rise to one of the most famous American paintings from the early nineteenth century. You've seen it on many Christmas cards. The painter is Edward Hicks who was a Quaker

minister as well as a painter. He painted sixty-one renditions of the painting called “Peaceable Kingdom” – wolf and lamb lying down together.



That vision of the Kingdom still presses on and will only come to fulfillment as we, the followers of Jesus, work to bring it about, preparing the way of the Lord, making straight the crooked paths of injustice, discrimination, poverty and animosity. The first week of Advent has passed. Let's each ask a question of our heart: *What have I done to prepare the coming of the Lord? Have I “repented”—that is, have I come back to the Lord? Have I built around me the new heaven and the new earth by radiating a little more joy... a little more love?*

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