

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
November 29, 2009 – First Sunday of Advent

A Season of Yearning
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-9

How many of you remember the *Johnny Carson Show*? The show always opened the same way: Ed McMahon would say, “Welcome to the *Tonight Show* starring Johnny Carson,” then a listing of special guests followed by his famous “Heeere’s Johnny!” When Johnny retired, someone asked him about the secret of his success in show business, and Johnny said something like, “I was lucky enough to get introduced by the great Ed McMahon.”

He was serious. A good introduction is everything. “Good introductions have the difficult task of getting an audience excited about the speaker who is to come, to warm them up, to get them to trust the speaker, and to do it all in just a few minutes and in a way that does not call attention to the maker of the introduction.”¹

Bad introductions take too much time and take the focus off the main speaker. One speaker, after an introduction that felt like it was never-

¹ William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Advent 2009, p. 42.

ending, said, “Forgive me for interrupting your overly gracious introduction of my speech with my speech...”

I’ve got all this on my mind because today’s Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent is about John the Baptist – the one who prepares the way for and introduces Jesus. Advent traditionally begins with John, who gets us ready to meet Jesus. So that you can’t get to Christmas without first hearing John the Baptist’s introduction.

Frankly, we didn’t come to church today to hear John the Baptist. We came to hear Jesus. John himself says that he’s not the main speaker. He’s the one who prepares the way for the main speaker. He’s the unknown opening band for U2. He’s the Ed McMahon figure – nobody turned on the *Tonight Show* to watch Ed McMahon. And yet, all four Gospels begin the story of Jesus with John the Baptist introducing him. You can’t get to Jesus until you first hear John.

Not only that, but John the Baptist is not your normal guy introducing the main speaker. He doesn’t make the audience comfortable; he screams at them and calls them a bunch of snakes! Makes you wonder why anyone stuck around for the main act.

But after thinking about it a while longer, it may start to make sense. The message from John is not easy news, but it is good news. What John is telling us is that we are sinful, depraved beings who need help. We can't save ourselves. We often act like contented, self-satisfied religious folk, but if we're honest, we know we're not right, that our world is out of kilter. John helps us confront the truth – we need to change the way we live our lives. The good news is that, with God's help, we *can* change.

William Willimon, in speaking of his friend who pastors a group of churches in Africa, says: “By my estimation, he has suffered greatly in recent years. His country has gone through terrible turmoil. There has been political oppression. Along with this came grave civil strife. My friend was even in prison for a time.

Thus, when he came to the United States on a pastoral visit, I welcomed him with open arms and did what I could to help him. After all, as I said he had been through some terrible times in his church and in his country.

But I was surprised, when his stay with me ended and we were talking about the desperate situation to which he would return, I was surprised to hear him say, ‘Actually, I have more sympathy with your situation.’

My situation? My church is not beset by political enemies. I have no friends in the ministry who have been jailed for their convictions. None of my people suffer from pervasive poverty. How could he have sympathy with my situation?

‘There is just so much here. You have so much freedom, so many things. What is left to offer people? What needs do they have for which the gospel could be fulfillment? I have great respect for those of you who preach the gospel and who minister in the situation of North America,’ the friend went on. ‘There is so much, [so many full hands, full homes, full bellies, full shopping carts,] and so little emptiness. The gospel feeds upon emptiness.’” (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Dec. 2003, p. 42).

I believe we need to take seriously this critique. Here in this country, there is *so much*. Many people complain at this time of year that Christmas is too commercial, too focused on people getting more and more stuff. In this country our thirst for stuff is insatiable, and some of us are affluent enough to try to satisfy that thirst. And it’s not only material possessions – for a number of us, our lives have become so full, so busy, that it’s difficult to find space during the week for God. In the midst of so much, can the gospel still speak to us?

Yes, it can, but we may need to create some “empty” places first. No doubt, it’s difficult for the gospel to compete with all the cacophony in our lives. That’s why retreats are so great. Several weekends ago, our youth went on a high school retreat at Warm Beach Camp. One thing that happens at a retreat is that the kids get unplugged – detached from their CD players, the TV, the computer, the e-mail, and the movies. They go away from these things to focus on God, so that there is enough room for leaders to speak to them about Jesus.

But we don’t have to literally go away to a retreat center to create space for God. Taking time to light an Advent wreath at home, reading Scripture and praying, spending 5 or 10 minutes in silence, or just taking the time to notice signs of God’s presence, can have the same effect. Kids are great at this – my kids are always pointing out Christmas lights as they ride in the car. What a great reminder for me to slow down during my errands and reflect on the meaning of this season.

Here in this country, there is just so much of everything. Most of us have great affluence compared with the rest of the world. On the whole, we have more food that we can (or should!) eat and more material possessions than we know what to do with. And yet, in the midst of this abundance,

when we're able to unclutter our lives, we realize that we "still haven't found what we're looking for." (U2)

Furthermore, even in the midst of all our stuff, many people are lonely, unhappy, and unfulfilled. Many are struggling, especially during the holidays, with a sense of despair and emptiness. Many yearn for something more.

Yearning - that's actually part of what we do here at church every year at Advent. "Advent is a season of yearning. In Advent, the hymns we sing are somewhat restrained. They speak of desire, of waiting, of expectation. The Advent prophets all speak to a people in exile, a people suffering from homelessness and despair." (Willimon, 43).

John the Baptist's voice is the one "crying out in the wilderness." In order to hear John's cry, we need to be in the wilderness. As Willimon says, "In order to see the fragile light of Christmas, one has first got to become accustomed to the dark."

It's not easy being in the dark, even if it is because we're waiting for an encounter with Jesus. It's sometimes downright scary waiting in the dark. There's a story of people who had just endured a devastating hurricane. For three days, their power had been out. It was hot, humid, and

miserable during the day. But it was frightening at night. Rumors were that there had been much looting. Robberies had taken place because there was no electricity, no way to call the police, no streetlights.

Thus, when, in the darkness, there was a pounding at the front door, they were filled with great fear. Was this a robber? Was this a looter trying to find out if the house was empty? There was no way to call anyone for help.

The knocking continued. They peered out the window and tried to make out the figures on the front porch. “Hey,” a voice called out. “We’ve got a big bag of ice for you, some fresh water, too!”

They made out the faces of their next door neighbors, their friends who had come to bring them some wonderful gifts.

As we peer out into darkness, it makes all the difference in the world whose face we see. Friend or foe?

Advent means, that when we look over the darkened and storm-filled horizon, we see the face of Jesus. That makes all the difference, in the end. (Pulpit Resource, Dec. 2003, 40)

The light of Christ shines in the darkness. Keep looking, keep yearning, and we shall see the face of Jesus. Amen.