

Sermon Bytes: What is Yet to Come
Matthew 3:1–12

December 4, 2016
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Every year, in the second week of Advent the lectionary readings tend to give us liturgical whiplash. It sort of feels like back when I was a teenager and learning how to drive a stick shift. We started strong on Advent 1 with the pressing imminence of the Kingdom of God. This sense of something beautiful and terrifying on the horizon. Something we can't predict, yet must prepare for. Something we can seek in the midst of the holiday hustle and bustle. Reading our world, our lives, our beings for Christ's incarnation. Where is this true - Emmanuel – God with us?

Yes the Gospel from Advent 1 sets the tone so exquisitely that "O Come O Come Emmanuel," is on our lips, and we are out looking for matches to light the wreath, settling in to a season of preparation for the Incarnation of God. The lessons from week one does such a wonderful job of setting us up for the infant Jesus and the story that follows Jesus life and ministry – to Good Friday and the cross to Easter and the empty tomb.

Week two on the other hand gives us John the Baptist - a man in a hair shirt, and Jesus nowhere to be found. John makes sense in Epiphany, knee deep in the Jordan when Jesus is being baptized. But here in Advent, the season of preparation for the incarnation. John and his hair shirt and locusts and honey, feels like a rude imposition, like something we have to put up with until we get to pick ourselves back up on Gaudete Sunday (the third Sunday in Advent).

Part of our challenge is that we in the Western Church have focused on John as the Baptist and hence on his ministry of Baptism, and we don't follow our Eastern Church brothers and Sisters, the Orthodox who refer to John almost exclusively as "John the Forerunner." It may seem like a strange distinction, but our respective titles signify quite a bit.

While the Western title focuses on the actions of Johns Ministry the Eastern title pivots on John's relationship to Jesus. John is the one who is arrives before the one who is to come. He is the signpost... The way-maker... The fore-runner. This vital emphasis on relationship over action bears out in the text itself. It's easy to gloss over the fact that the Pharisees and Sadducees were amongst those coming to be baptized. Perhaps they were coming to do what we can't help but read as the right thing and yet, John tells them to turn around. Don't count on your history – on what was. Turn around. Metanoete. See yourself, your community, and your place in it differently. Don't walk out of this water the same way you came in.

If we see what John is exhorting the Pharisees and Sadducees to as an call to conversion to relationship with the coming Christ rather than simply call to do penance because they are doing it all wrong (which is how most of the history of Western Christianity renders this passage) then drawing the connection from that Metanoia

experience and thus The Advent local of this story changes it to part of preparing the way For the coming of God.

In other words for our reading today John's ministry is what it is because of its relation to the coming of Christ. – that is what Advent is all about repentance, conversion, only matters in light of the coming of the Kingdom. John is only who he is because he is the one who comes before, his relationship with Jesus. The contemporary irony of the Holiday Season is that in a time when the liturgical year is begging us to just be, the church calendar and the world around us keep telling us to do.

Combine that with our preoccupation of repentance-as-action and it's easy to see why it's so difficult for us not to turn around ourselves to turn our understanding of John not simply as the Baptist but rather as John the Forerunner, even if only until for a month until we meet John and Jesus together on the same stage -knee deep in the Jordan

So we turn from the center stage action of Advent 1 with Jesus at the center of everything to a historical moment that includes only an allusion to Jesus. As someone still hanging out in the wings and yet already the focus of the interplay on stage. It's one thing to ask Jesus to come and change the world. It is a much more difficult thing to change ourselves. - to see ourselves differently. To frame our relationship with God and neighbour in new ways, and then to bear fruit worthy of that transformation.

Our liturgical whiplash is a product of that difficulty, a difficulty that isn't helped by the particularities of our tradition, or the frenetic pace of the secular season. To see what this text is doing we have to stop. We have to take stock of our relationship to the text, to its protagonist, who for this day - isn't Jesus but John – not as the Baptist – but as the forerunner and to where the season and the man both are pointing. Forward. To what is yet to come. And there's nothing more characteristically Advent than that.

Nelson Mandela, who died December 5, 2013 at age 95, was an Advent kind of person – a person who saw themselves. As one who pointed out what was yet to be In many ways his message was an advent one. Be patient - change is coming. Mandela urged his people onward toward hasten that change, but warning at the same time the road was arduous. "I am fundamentally an optimist," he said. "Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head ones heart pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward." It was a message of peace. He lived by the words, "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."

But peacemaking was neither quick nor easy. "I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended."

His message was one of persistent hope. Mandela's opposition to apartheid landed him in prison for 27 years. He used to say with a smile "In my country we go to prison first and then become President." Though often discouraged, he did not give up. Later in life he said, "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again." Much of his success lay in his persistence. In his autobiography Mandela tells of his joy when, he was introduced to his new baby granddaughter. In her face he saw the future of his people. It was customary for the grandfather to name the babies in the family, so he chose her name. She would be called Zaziwe, which means Hope. She would be named for a hopeful future for his people.

His message was a message of love, the greatest of all gifts. Mandela said so eloquently, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Nelson Mandela was a great catalyst for positive change in the 20th Century. If he will be thought by some to be a saint, he would contradict by saying, "I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying."

So it is fitting we remember him during Advent. May we each strive to be saints: sinners who keep on trying.