

The Rev. Dcn. Peter Swarr
Second Sunday in Advent
December 10, 2006

It was a cool, foggy day as I was walking up the hill to seminary. As was so often the case I was reading a book as I walked on the sidewalk, trying to stay caught up with the mountain of reading that was a basic part of my seminary education at VTS. Finals were only a few weeks away, I was getting ready for yet another set of interviews with the Diocese of Maine which were part and parcel of my 8 year-long ordination process. Life was busy, politics continued to fill the air of Metro DC, and I was trying to keep my head above water. Nothing was particularly unusual about that cool morning; I was just going about life as usual reading on my way to VTS. And then, then I stopped and looked up...

Today Luke tell us that John the Baptist lived in a very specific time filled with political and religious issues just like the modern world. John lived, like we do, during the political reign of many different rulers. There was nothing extraordinary about it. He too knew the realities of kings and leaders vying for power, trying to create new building programs, trying to bring peace and prosperity to the land. John lived, as do we, in the midst of history and in the midst of culture. And it was in the midst of that history and human busy-ness that John the Baptist proclaimed to those who would listen the coming of God and the need of humanity to repent and prepare.

John lived as a prophet of the Lord in the region of the Jordan, a river in Israel that runs from north to south from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. John could not have chosen a more symbolically powerful place to speak of preparing for the coming of God. Many years before John the Baptist was born to his mother Elizabeth the people of Israel had gathered in this same area and prepared for God to transform their lives. They had wandered year after year in the desert, having miraculously left slavery in Egypt. They had only known the life of being aliens in foreign lands. It was at the Jordan that Israel saw God act to give them a land of their own. No longer would they live as aliens; they would have a home.

It was at this very Jordan river that Joshua, the man who led the Israelites into the Promised Land, asked all of Israel to choose who they would serve—the One true God, or the idols of the world that vie for human attention (Joshua 24:15). And on that day Israel said, along with Joshua, “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” The Jordan was forever etched in the collective memory of Israel as a place of choosing God, a place of turning from the way of death and destruction and choosing to follow the way of life, the way of God, the way that led to the Promised Land.

It was this very act of choosing to turning from death to life, from idols to God, that John the Baptist proclaimed yet again to Israel. John not only called people to repent but he called them to act out their repentance in baptism. Now mind you, the baptism of John is not the same baptism you have seen here in this church building. To begin with, John’s baptism was not Christian baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the Trinity was still more than 300 years away. Secondly John’s

Baptism took place in the middle of a muddy river and it did not merely involve getting your hair and forehead wet. It involved being totally immersed in water—symbolizing consciously choosing to repent and be cleansed from past sin—it symbolized walking in a new way of life. Choosing the baptism of John was choosing to stop in the midst of your tracks, and turn around to follow the path of God even in the midst of all the demands of day-to-day life.

John the Baptist, along with all the prophets before him, called Israel, called humanity, to repent of their way of life that consistently forgot God. What John was calling Israel to was a complete change of life, a change in the way that humanity looked at and thought about life. The Greek word, *metanoia*, which the NRSV translates as “repentance” in this morning’s Gospel is filled with rich meaning above and beyond the idea of feeling sorry for a past action. *Metanoia* means changing, changing the way you live, the way you act, the way you think, and the way you see not simply regretting past actions. Other translations of *metanoia* use the English word “conversion” which clearly conjures up images of a change in life and world-view.

Inherent in this use of the word *metanoia* is the fact that humanity’s old way of living was not living at all; it was the way of death; be that death to self through self-destructive behaviors or death to neighbor through neglect, injustice or lack of compassion for the poor, or even death to the creation through squandering resources and destruction of the environment. The way that Israel and all of humanity was being called to repent of, to leave behind by John the Baptist was the way death.

However you understand what John was calling Israel to do by experiencing *metanoia*—repentance, conversion, change in the way humanity sees and lives—it is clear that human life needed to change, and change radically. So radically that the entire face of the world would be transformed—mountains will be brought low, valleys shall be raised up, rough and broken ground (such as many of the roads in metro Detroit) will be made smooth. This repentance, this conversion, demands and creates the transformation of human life and the transformation of the world.

Time and again the prophets of God have called us, the people of God, to repent, to turn away from death and to follow the way of life, the way of Christ. Time and again, that call has come in the midst of human busy-ness, in the midst of life circumstances that seem to demand that we keep doing what we are doing just to survive, that we stay the course, whatever the course may be. But God’s call to us through the prophets is impossible to ignore—“repent, turn around O my people, the kingdom of God, Christ our Lord, is coming! Turn around and see the new dawn of creation!” The prophets called out in the past and continue to call out to even now.

Advent is a time where we are called by prophets of old whose voices continue to cry out to stop in our tracks no matter what may be going on and to intentionally find a hole in the bread of our lives and to turn and face our God. You and I are being called to stop, and to examine our lives, to find where it is that we walk in the valley of the shadow of

death, where it is that our thoughts and our deeds bring death in place of life, and then repent, turn around and live true life.

Repentance is not easy. It was not easy for the people of Israel, it is not easy for me, it is not easy for you. But repentance, turning to face God, is what we are called to. Through the grace of God, through the fellowship of this community of faith, through the presence of the Spirit of God here in the midst of us, God empowers us to stop and to turn. The Song of Zechariah which we proclaimed in place of the Psalm today makes it clear just what happens when we stop and we turn. “In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us. To shine on those who dwell in the darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:78-79) (*on prisoners of darkness, the sun begins to rise, the dawning of forgiveness upon the sinners eyes. He guides the feet of pilgrims along the paths of peace—Hymnal 444*) Such a vision of a new day, a new dawn of peace, of God being all in all is what all the prophets call us to. We are being called to TRUE life. Such a vision of God’s mercy and grace flooding into the world is exactly what began in the incarnation of Christ and continues through the work of the Church.

Three years ago on that foggy morning in Alexandria, VA I stopped in my tracks on my way to seminary. What I saw that took my breath away was the dawn. Off to my right, hanging over a school field was a bank of low-lying fog which was lit up brilliantly by the rising sun. The fog was simply alive with pink and orange and red colors, vibrant and beautiful. I had never seen such a beautiful sunrise. Somehow, even in the midst of my busy-ness, in the midst of my daily walk to seminary, in the midst of urban Alexandria, Virginia somehow in the midst of all of that was intense and incredible beauty given to me and to the world as a gracious gift from God. On that cool, foggy morning, filled with its day to day busy-ness I stopped, turned, and saw the light of God dawning in front of my very eyes.

It is through the Spirit working through body of Christ, the Church, that we are given the grace to stop in our tracks and see the light of God. We may see the light of God on a walk to seminary, or in the midst of budget discussions, Christmas shopping, or familial strife. It is in the midst of everyday life that God calls us to stop, turn, and see the light of God shinning forth in utter beauty, beckoning us to live a new life, a life filled with joy, justice, and peace, a life filled with the new dawn of Christ. May we be given the grace to repent this Advent season, to stop in our tracks, turn towards God and see the new dawn shinning forth, beckoning us all to new life in Christ.

AMEN