

The Third Sunday of Advent- St. Francis Church
© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson
December 16, 2007

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble (tottering) knees!
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you."
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Isaiah 35:3-6

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Matthew 11:2-6

The connection between these two texts, one from the Old Covenant and the other from the New Covenant seems pretty unmistakable. It seems so nice and tidy: we hear a word from the prophet and then while his words are still ringing in our ears we hear it happening in the ministry of Jesus. The eyes of the blind are opened and the deaf hear. Who could miss it?

Anybody who reads the Old Testament knows that when Messiah comes there is supposed to be peace on earth and good will to all people and the lion is supposed to lie down with the lamb and swords will be beaten into plowshares. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; all that good stuff we've been talking about now for three weeks in Advent.

So Jesus is born, and is baptized by John in the Jordan River and teaches people about the Kingdom of God, and heals the sick and then he's killed. By faith, however, we claim that is not the end of the story: that on the third day he was raised from the dead and death is destroyed.

But here's the thing: the world looks pretty much after Jesus as it did before. There isn't peace in the Middle East, let alone on earth. There isn't good will toward all. Most nations spend way more on swords than plowshares in their national budgets and lions still eat lambs for supper. So if Messiah is supposed to do all those things, what happened?

The answer to that question is the very heart of our faith, that while Easter marks a new beginning, it isn't finished yet. We are still waiting. That is what Advent is all about—not only waiting for the first coming of baby Jesus but for the second coming of Christ the King. That is the mystery of faith: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.*

Waiting is hard, and it's tempting in the meantime to spiritualize the good news of God by turning it into some fuzzy internal feeling. Or to postpone it all and wait until we get to heaven. But the prophets imagine God's reign *on earth* as it is in heaven

So Jesus is a great teacher, a healer, the kind of guy you want to eat supper with. But how do we know he is *the One*? That is John's question today and it lingers in the air. John has been out there proclaiming that the One who comes after him is going to usher in that reign of God—justice and peace and all the rest. And then John finds himself sitting in a prison cell and as I'm sure you remember, there is no last minute stay of execution coming for him. I imagine John was confused and maybe even a bit angry because the One whose sandals he knew he wasn't fit to untie is out there doing good stuff, to be sure—important ministry. But in a macro-cosmic sense the world looks pretty much the same as it always has. In the greater scheme of things it can feel like small potatoes.

So how do you know? If you are a good Jew or a good Christian—if you live in the first century or the twenty-first—if you are sitting in a prison cell or in a church pew—how do you know when it is God at work and that Messiah has come?

“Go tell John what you see and what you hear,” Jesus says. It is such classic, vintage Jesus. He doesn't directly answer the question: he just encourages people to open their eyes and ears. But the problem with that is always the same: when you look, what do you see? Is that glass you are looking at half-full or half-empty? When you listen to the evening news: is the world being made new or coming unglued? Is the light shining in the darkness or is it getting darker out?

It's not just about whether we are constitutionally more optimists or pessimists as far as I can tell—although perhaps that's part of it. We can look at the same thing—each of us, from one day to the next and see it differently. Is it an opportunity or a crisis? Is it something that will help us grow or will it be our undoing? Is God in the midst of it all or absent?

So much has to do with where we are and that can change from day-to-day. If we are overtired or depressed or angry or confused—sometimes we just plain cannot see. I mean literally, we sometimes cannot see what is right before our eyes. The optic nerves are working just fine and delivering messages to the brain, but we are blind. And sometimes it's like those images where if you blink you see it one way and if you blink again you see something else: an old lady or a young girl.

Go tell John what you see and hear. Sometimes people whose lives seem (at least from where I stand) to be so incredibly blessed still struggle with doubt and uncertainty about whether God loves them or even exists. And sometimes people whose lives seem (at least from where I stand) to be so incredibly sad are able to find joy and hope and the presence of God in the smallest of life's gifts. The externals don't always dictate how we will view even our own lives—we can have it all and feel empty; we can have very little and feel extraordinarily rich. What you see depends on how you look, and where you look. What you hear depends a great deal on who you're talking with.

So two people stand on the beach and watch the sun rise—and one of them is overcome with awe and wonder and filled with an awareness of the goodness of life and the benevolence of God while the other sees a ball of fire that will eventually burn itself out. And maybe the next day the roles are reversed.

So what are you seeing this December? Do you see weak hands and tottering knees being strengthened? Because where you see those things happening, I think Jesus is saying, there you see God at work. There you see signs of Messiah's presence. And if once you were blind but now you see in amazingly different ways—isn't that good news?

I think we have to be intentional about looking for signs of God's presence in the world. If we can find ways to put ourselves in places where we can get glimpses at least, of new life and new possibilities, then it becomes food for the journey. And as we learn where to look and how to look with eyes that see it becomes more and more difficult to be an atheist because we see signs of God's presence where we never before even thought to look. In places like a homeless shelter because there isn't room in the inn; in places where forgiveness is offered where it may not really be deserved; even on a cross where an instrument of shameful death becomes the way of life.

As people of faith, where we see joy and peace and light shining in the darkness we need to be able to name those things as sure signs of God's presence in our midst. That doesn't mean there isn't still pain in the world, or that we need to live in denial. But where love and charity are—there God is. That's at the heart of the Old and New Covenants. If you see love of neighbor, you see the love of God. Where there is hope and healing and new life—we need to give thanks. And where we do not yet see these things, we need to ask, "Lord, what can I do?" How can I be an instrument of your peace?

So what do you see? I believe that the great challenge for most of us in December is that we are moving at warp speed and at warp speed it is hard to take account; it's hard to notice the little things. And that sometimes in our desire to make Christmas perfect, we miss what is right before our very eyes, imperfect but nevertheless real and beautiful.

It is fun when you live in New England to complain about the winter. But the truth is that most of us who do choose to live here prefer living in a place where there are four seasons and not just one. I mean how boring would San Diego get with 72 degrees and sunny every day? Winter has come early this year, or maybe we're just back to normal. We can be so hard to please: we listen to our carols and sing "let it snow, let it snow, let it snow" and we dream of a White Christmas, but then it comes and too often we fail to see it as a gift. Very often as we get older we see it only as a problem to be managed—something to be plowed or shoveled, something that will back up traffic.

But one of the great gifts of a big snow storm is that it forces us to slow down. It may wreck our plans, but if that's all we see we miss the beauty and the gift of an opportunity to maybe play a game together, or build a fire, or go cross country skiing. What do you see? Take time to look—even in December, especially in December, and I predict that what you see will strengthen your faith because you'll find the Christ all around you.