

Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday in Advent

Date: December 17, 2006

Sermon Title: A Vision for a New World

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I had coffee the other day with a friend – a friend who has a vision for what our world could be like. He spoke of the possibility of peace between nations, and shared his ideas about how we could move towards that in places like the Middle East and Iraq. He spoke of the terrible hunger and poverty that consumes people in third world countries, and of his conviction that if first world nations were to take that seriously, we could make a significant difference in the lives of so many people. He spoke of the energy crisis our world is facing, and how reduced consumption, greater efficiency, and development of renewable resources could move us away from edge of that cliff. He's got other ideas too: he is concerned about education, high divorce rates, corruption in politics and in business, abortion, global warming, declining membership in old-line Christian denominations. It was an interesting conversation, in part because he is so bright. But also in part because he addresses these issues differently than so many others do. He has concerns, but he also has proposed solutions. And he is profoundly hopeful. He is convinced that we can make a difference, if we could only figure out how to work together. I enjoy every chance I get to visit with him and learn from him.

I was thinking of him this week as I studied this morning's Gospel text. It is the second week, now, that we have focused our attention on St. John, the Baptizer. Last week we considered his fiery preaching, and his call to repentance. But this week I find myself wondering what it was like to spend time with him. We talked about that last Wednesday at our mid-week Bible study. It is interesting to read what he had to say: he was so caustic "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?" Not many sermons begin like that these days. And if they did, I can't imagine that people would be streaming in from all over the county to hear it a second time. Yet that is what happened with John. His preaching was harsh – from the reports we have in the Bible, it seems that he challenged people to their very core. Yet we read that people came from all around to hear him. They faced difficult terrain, poor roads and trails, the ever-present threat of highway robbers and unpredictable weather. None of that deterred them, however. They were determined to find John, and it seems that many of them did.

So why did they go to such lengths to spend time with him? It may have simply been that they enjoyed feeling badly about themselves, and John helped them to do that. (That's what good Lutherans do, right? We come to church to feel badly about ourselves. Well, maybe we don't really do that anymore. But there was a day...) At any rate, I doubt that is the reason people went out to be with John. My guess is that it had more to do with his outlook on life. We find glimpses of that in his preaching.

What kind of world did John envision? He envisioned a world in which nobody lacks for a coat or jacket.

FIRST LESSON
ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20

PSALM
ISAIAH 12:2-6

SECOND LESSON
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

GOSPEL LESSON
ST. LUKE 3:7-18

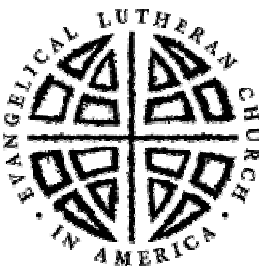
PRAYER OF THE DAY
STIR UP THE WILLS OF YOUR
FAITHFUL PEOPLE, LORD GOD,
AND OPEN OUR EARS TO THE
PREACHING OF JOHN, THAT
REJOICING IN YOUR
SALVATION, WE MAY BRING
FORTH THE FRUITS OF
REPENTANCE; THROUGH
JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR
AND LORD, WHO LIVES AND
REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE
HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, NOW
AND FOREVER.
AMEN.

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Some of you receive internet updates from our Lutheran magazine. (If you don't, you can subscribe to them through a link on Saint Peter's web site – look for the red rectangle at the bottom of the front page.) This past week they had a feature story about a ministry in Cairo that has a great heart for the people of its community. ⁱ In the story, the author reported on a conversation with Richard Alhusen, the director of the St. Andrew Refugee Ministry in Cairo. He said, "If you ask a child whether he has a coat, he'll say 'yes.' But he may not wear it the next day, or the next, because he's sharing it with his brothers and sisters."

The interesting thing about this ministry is that they are aware there are many international college students living in that city. One of them is Saint Peter's own Laura Romceвич, who has been studying in Cairo this semester, and is preparing now to return home for the Christmas break. After break, she'll return to school at Penn. She, like many of those students, has accumulated clothing, furniture and household items that she doesn't want to pack up and ship home. St. Andrew Refugee Ministry receives those items from students, and re-distributes them among those who don't have as much as they need.

What kind of world did John envision? He envisioned a world in which nobody lacks for a coat or jacket. And St. Andrew Refugee Ministry in Cairo is one of the ways that God is making St. John's vision a reality today.

What kind of world did John envision? He envisioned a world in which nobody goes to bed hungry. One of the great benefits of being part of this ELCA, is a ministry of our larger church called the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. This organization improves the lives of people in need in the United States and around the world by: providing immediate relief for people affected by chronic hunger and poverty; assisting whole communities through long-term, sustainable development to help alleviate chronic hunger and poverty; advocating for justice by changing laws and systems; and educating members of the ELCA in awareness of issues relating to hunger, poverty and justice.

I've been a supporter of this appeal for many years. Some time back they did some research, and found out that the average Lutheran gives less than 1¢ per day to this remarkable organization. We have some Saint Peter members who regularly pick up an envelope off the chair in front of them during worship and make a special gift to the World Hunger Appeal – putting them well ahead of the national average for Lutherans. I am so thankful for their support of this great organization, and I encourage you all to fill one of those envelopes and make a gift before the end of this year (be sure to give at least \$3.65). That is one way that we can truly make a difference.

ⁱ See "Whoever Has To Coats..." from the Lutheran magazine – on the web at <http://www.thelutheran.org>
"In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise' "
(Luke 3:11).
Two months ago I was in Egypt. It was 80 degrees outside and Christmas seemed very far off. As I watched children, some barefoot, play soccer in a sunny courtyard, it was hard to imagine that the weather gets cold enough to require a coat. But it does, and for hundreds of Sudanese refugee children living temporarily in Cairo, a blanket or coat is too expensive for their families to provide.
"If you ask a child whether he has a coat, he'll say 'yes,' " said Richard Allhusen, director of the St. Andrew Refugee Ministry in Cairo. "But he may not wear it the next day, or the next, because he's sharing it with his brothers and sisters."
Each week the ministry provides classes for 200 children and 700 adults, as well as sewing, woodworking and painting workshops. Teachers and staff help identify schoolchildren who need clothing or jackets and families who need furniture. Often, college students returning home from a study-abroad sojourn in Cairo will donate house wares, furniture and clothing they no longer need. At Christmas each child receives a blanket, and Allhusen said the ministry keeps extras available in case a child asks for one for a brother or sister.
For women with an interest in sewing, the ministry provides a drop-in workshop where Aisha Abdul teaches them to design outfits from start to finish. They begin by drawing their patterns and go home with a modest tunic-and-skirt set. Making their clothing helps them save money, as well as teaches a valuable skill they can, in turn, use to make an income.

What kind of world did John envision? He envisioned a world in which nobody goes to bed hungry. And the ELCA's World Hunger Appeal is one of the ways that God is making St. John's vision a reality today.

Clothing. Food. Honesty in business. Protection from unjust authorities. Forgiveness. John understood what people needed, and he envisioned a world in which those who have been blessed with wealth and power understand that God has created a world that is capable of sustaining all of its inhabitants, and that God desires to use their blessings to see that all the world is well. That kind of vision is attractive – enticing – and I wonder if that is why so many followed John.

Yet John's experience of the world's reality was much different than his hope. He knew what it was like to lack clothing and live with hunger. He knew the impact that greedy tax collectors had on those who had little to spare, yet whom these tax collectors oppressed systematically. He knew the unnecessary violence that was inflicted on innocents by soldiers who misused their power and strength. He knew what it was like to live under the rule of unjust kings – he himself would eventually be beheaded because he dared to challenge the behavior of King Herod. John may have hoped for a world where people didn't suffer in these ways, but he knew better than to imagine that it was reality yet.

What was his response? He called his listeners to bear fruits of repentance, because he knew that was the first step in transforming them – and that, transformed, they were the ones through whom God would fulfill this vision.

John taught his listeners to seek forgiveness – because although our brothers and sisters in this human community are the ones who suffer because of our self-indulgent ways, our lack of care for them is an affront to our God. John called them to repentance – to head in an entirely different direction – to begin living and acting in ways that make a positive difference in the world. Perhaps that is why so many longed to be near him. Perhaps that is why his message changed so many lives. He helped them to understand that they were the solution – that they were the ones through whom God would work to heal this broken world.

God wants to change the world through us as well. Clothe the naked. Feed the hungry. Be honest and trustworthy at work. Do not take advantage of your position at someone else's expense. These are the hallmarks of a life that bears fruit of repentance. These are the attributes of one who hears John's challenge, and responds in faith.

Let me leave with you with this one question:

QUESTION OF THE DAY:

What self-indulgent habits and desires does God call me to step away from today?

How can a deeper sense of gratitude and generosity help me to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 17, 2006)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

⁷ Ἐλεγεν οὖν τοῖς ἐκπορευομένοις ὄχλοις βαπτισθῆναι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ· γεννήματα ἔχιδνῶν, τίς ὑπέδειξεν ὑμῖν φυγεῖν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς; ⁸ ποιήσατε οὖν καρποὺς ἀξίους τῆς μετανοίας καὶ μὴ ἀρξῆσθε λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς· πατέρα ἔχομεν τὸν Ἀβραάμ. λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι δύναται ὁ θεὸς ἐκ τῶν λίθων τούτων ἐγεῖραι τέκνα τῷ Ἀβραάμ. ⁹ ἤδη δὲ καὶ ἡ ἀξίνη πρὸς τὴν ῥίζαν τῶν δένδρων κείται· πᾶν οὖν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται. ¹⁰ Καὶ ἐπηρώτων αὐτὸν οἱ ὄχλοι λέγοντες· τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν; ¹¹ ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς· ὁ ἔχων δύο χιτῶνας μεταδότω τῷ μὴ ἔχοντι, καὶ ὁ ἔχων βρώματα ὁμοίως ποιείτω. ¹² ἦλθον δὲ καὶ τελῶναι βαπτισθῆναι καὶ εἶπαν πρὸς αὐτόν· διδάσκαλε, τί ποιήσωμεν; ¹³ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν πρὸς αὐτοῦς· μηδὲν πλέον παρὰ τὸ διατεταγμένον ὑμῖν πράσσετε. ¹⁴ ἐπηρώτων δὲ αὐτὸν καὶ στρατευόμενοι λέγοντες· τί ποιήσωμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς; καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· μηδένα διασεῖσητε μηδὲ συκοφαντήσητε καὶ ἀρκείσθε τοῖς ὀψωνίοις ὑμῶν.

¹⁵ Προσδοκῶντος δὲ τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ διαλογιζομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν περὶ τοῦ Ἰωάννου, μήποτε αὐτὸς εἴη ὁ χριστός, ¹⁶ ἀπεκρίνατο λέγων πᾶσιν ὁ Ἰωάννης· ἐγὼ μὲν ὕδατι βαπτίζω ὑμᾶς· ἔρχεται δὲ ὁ ἰσχυρότερος μου, οὗ οὐκ εἰμι ἰκανὸς λῦσαι τὸν ἱμάντα τῶν ὑποδημάτων αὐτοῦ· αὐτὸς ὑμᾶς βαπτίσει ἐν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ καὶ πυρί· ¹⁷ οὗ τὸ πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ διακαθάραι τὴν ἄλωνα αὐτοῦ καὶ συναγαγεῖν τὸν σίτον εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην αὐτοῦ, τὸ δὲ ἄχυρον κατακαύσει πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ. ¹⁸ Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἕτερα παρακαλῶν εὐηγγελίζετο τὸν λαόν. ^{iv}

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 3:7-18, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{iv} St. Luke 3:7-18, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.