

From Advent to Birth

Slide – blinking 12:00

Getting from John the Baptist to Jesus the Savior of the World is a brief moment in time, yet a decisive one. It is the space on which our faith turns. It is the transition from hopes for the coming of the Lord and the engagement of our preparation to the birth of newness in Christ. The window of advent to birth is an instant in time, like the interruption of electricity that is only a blip, and does not cause all our digital clocks to begin blinking “12:00.” It is so brief the world might not give it a thought, but in terms of our salvation, it is a great move in time. It is a move from the seriousness of the John season to the grace of the Jesus season.

Sometimes we cannot get to the Jesus season fast enough. We want to skip over periods of waiting and preparations. We wish to go directly to the wondrous gifts of healing and newness without dwelling on what is in need of healing. We don't want to look at death or sin or destruction. Just give us the good news such as reading the texts on abundance from the prophet Isaiah and ignoring what comes before it.

Isaiah chapter 34 insists that God will not be mocked. There comes an end to those who continually oppose Yahweh. Destruction and chaos will fill the land. “The streams of Edom will flow sluggish, thick with pollution, the soil sterile, poisoned with waste, the whole country a smoking, stinking garbage dump...thistles will take over...wildcats and hyenas will hunt together, demons and devils dance through the night.” (Isaiah 34, The Message)

Slide – waters in the desert

Then suddenly, without explanation, Isaiah 35 interrupts the despair and devastation. It is a look to what can be. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing...” (Isaiah 35). There is joy because the arch of God's promises is greater than God's anger. The prophet suddenly dares to speak a word out of place.

Yet this word out of place is something that the ancient people of God practiced. They would sing praises to God before the world was turned right-side up. Walter Bruggemann called this “singing praises against the data.” What is the data we see? What does it feel like as we tend to the evening news or the front page of the paper in the early morning? The data of those sources is often heavy. Add to that that data of our own lives: waiting for the doctor's report, learning to live in the face of loss, wondering how the bills will get paid. The data is pervasive and we long for a word out of place.

Isaiah 35 is that word. Today I wish we had a baptism so there would be the baptismal river flowing from the font. Then we could visualize the abundance of God's creative powers as we celebrate the wonder of God's promises to create life.

Who will speak a word out of place? Where will we see miracles and new life? Where will creation be healed, reconciled and resurrected? When I do see these things happening, then I can believe that Jesus is the One who is to come. Then I will acknowledge that the world is turning right side up.

Slide – John in prison

Today's story in the gospel of Matthew takes place long after the birth of Jesus. We hear John questioning the identity of Jesus. We wonder how John doubted that Jesus is the one at this point in the story. Just last week in worship we heard how John is one who is relentlessly encouraging people to get

ready for the coming of the LORD. “The Advent of God is near! Prepare yourselves!” He cries. Those who had weak hands and feeble knees were looking for something or someone to restore their brokenness. Those who were in places of wilderness, places of “no thing” and “no word” were longing for life because clearly their trajectory was all downward and each day moved them closer to their total destruction. John had provided hope as he preached in the wilderness.

John was all about building expectation and preparing people in a holy time of waiting for the new thing God would do. Endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit the urgency flowed out of John in the most forsaken place of the region, the biblical wilderness, where the desert came up to the Jordan River.

John was one who spoke a word out of place and then witnessed the arrival of God’s new thing. We know from other gospel accounts, on the day Jesus was baptized, revelation happened to John. He heard a voice and saw a dove descend on Jesus. John bore witness to this event, saying, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:33-34).

Yet, after some time, the courageous forerunner, John the Baptist, who dedicated his whole life to the Lord, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, and who we trust was sent by God, became imprisoned for his witness of Jesus the Messiah. In today’s story John sends his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John needs to be able to see the miracles, new life and transformations that occur when the Savior of the world is active. Sitting in prison his vision had become clouded.

Jesus responds by pointing to the great things and the least. “The blind receive 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.” Healing and life are happening, and blessings abound for those who see, hear and follow. As great as John was in speaking a word out of place, yet, more is to come.

Slide – the vulnerable, the least

As good as John was in gathering the people and inspiring them to change, yet, greater are those who see the newness which comes with Jesus and believe. Greater are those who receive the newness and practice the newness. The grace of Jesus is not to be kept to the self, but it is to continually break out into the world. Practice the newness that Jesus enacts, to help the blind to see, the vulnerable who need guides, to help lepers back in, the ones socially excluded because they are not pure, not like us. Practice newness.

The other night on CBS news Steve Hartman reported on Charlie and Dorothy Hale of Rochester, NY, who in retirement pursued a new vocation, one of repairing broken musical instruments. Dorothy remarked that she always loved taking things apart, and decided it was about time she learned how to put something together. So she took a class in instrument repair.

She, a retired chemist, and Charlie, a retired doctor, now both in their 80’s, buy damaged instruments and restore them to their former glory. Then, they give them away. They have donated nearly 1,000 instruments to the Rochester School District.

Alison Schmitt, the lead teacher for the Rochester arts department said, “It’s unbelievable for two humans to care so much about other people’s children.” Alison said the impact has been huge. But

when Hartman tried to talk to the Hales about this, they seemed oblivious. “There are ripples of effect I’d hope,” Charlie said.

Sophomore William Delgado said it’s more like tidal waves. “Really music has and can create somebody, and it created me,” he said.

Studies consistently show that music education helps kids do better in school, overall. If for no other reason, it makes them want to attend. Whether the Hales realized it or not, they were practicing newness, like the creator of the world enacts, and new life was rising up in the lives of students. You could say the kids were waiting and in need of the newness though not perceiving it until life exploded in them when they were handed a free instrument.

Practice the newness that Jesus enacts, to help the deaf to hear, midst the din of the demands in the world, so that others might hear the calling of their names, and be assured and loved. Practice newness to help the dead to be raised, in the midst of a world which has too much killing, and speak of word opposing the killing with the power of God’s newness. Practice the newness to bring good news to the poor, news of canceled debts.

Slide – Holy Communion

At the space where Advent and birth meet is the feast of God’s newness. Waiting at the table is all the hope which John cultivated, all the demands for change which John encouraged, and all the joy of Jesus’ enactment of new life. Wherever bread is broken, wine is poured, and God’s promises are spoken, newness emerges.