

**The Rev. Christopher Bishop
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Radnor, PA
3 Advent, Sunday December 11, 2011**

Lectionary:

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Canticle 15 (Mary's *Magnificat*)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

In our biblical discussion group this week, we elected to take a detour from Genesis and dig into our Advent stories in the Gospels. And in each of those stories we have this mystifying character John, baptizing. And the question was asked, "What did baptism actually mean to the those Jews of the 1st century?" Which is a great question, because it helps us understand what baptism can mean for us, particularly as we have a baptism next week, here, with its opportunity to renew, re-live, our own baptismal vows.

And baptism, along with the image of light, runs through our readings. Baptism with water in 1st century Hebrew culture has its roots in the *mikvah*, a kind of frequent and personal, ritualized cleansing in specified public locations. One was continually washed of one's sins, with water and prayer. For those wishing to convert to Judaism, it was an important conversion ritual, being cleansed of all worldly dirtiness, your sins, before entering the faith and community. What is novel about John's baptizing is that he is doing a slam-dunk, a one and done. And part of what angered the authorities was the grandiosity, the finality of the claims John was making—that this baptism was once and for all, and was for the complete renewal of the whole spirit of the person, and thus a sign of the impending Kingdom of God.

And as God's self is preparing to come among us, John demonstrates, the key to its efficacy, our access to it, is confession, complete honesty about one's self. The idea being, that we tell the truth about ourselves, and we tell the truth about the world, and this is the beginning of relationship with God. Opening up a kingdom of relatedness between us and the rest of creation. This is part of the reason we do a confession together each week. We acknowledge everything, clear out some junk and clear a way for love.

And interestingly, the Gospeller John couples this call to baptism, this coming clean, so to speak, with the image of light. Light is the central image of the Gospel of John, the

verses just prior to today's text describing Jesus, "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The light of all people, shining in the darkness. What can that really mean?

Well, isn't it true that most of the really rotten things people concoct do to one another happen in the dark? In secrecy? Hidden from the light? Aren't most of the lousy things *we* do in the dark, hidden from all except perhaps ourselves? Isn't darkness and secrecy the engine of shame? Isn't that where we want to keep ours, such as it may be? Isn't every public corruption, every scandal, every betrayal carried on out of sight, in the dark, until the light of scrutiny, of accountability, of justice, somehow shines upon it?

I recall recently hearing a story of how our political system works for those in its profession. Senators and congressman of both parties are permitted, and regularly engage in, inside stock trading using information gleaned from their committee work and drafting of legislation. What is illegal to all other citizens is literally legal for these elected officials. Suddenly congress people are scattering before it, agreeing its egregious, and claiming ignorance, in the glare of media light.

But more to our point, to Advent's, to John the Baptist's, what about our darknesses? The places in our lives where the light of God, the light of love, the light of confession, the light of forgiveness might heal us and make straight the way of the Lord? A friend confided in me that she hated her father. Her dad was doing life in prison for murder, and she had only seen him like this since she was a child. She hadn't visited him in years. So last week she chose to go see him in what she called the "sad zone" of prisoner visiting rooms. But she took a CD of her music and an ipod, and some things she had written and published. And they became friends for the first time in her life, and her time with him transformed their relationship. In her case, literally bringing her light into the darkness of his incarceration.

And recall that Jesus explodes onto the scene in Luke quoting our passage from Isaiah today: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." This is such a powerful proclamation about the nature of God that Jesus, identifying himself as the one "anointed," by God, the "me" in his text, becomes the pretext under which the religious leaders call for his immediate execution.

This message of radical compassion, and Jesus declaring that it now has a human form and entails human responsibility, enrages the political structure, as such talk, when spoken with authority, often does.

And listen to Mary, in the beautiful *Magnificat* we just sang, as she proclaims the greatness of her Lord who “has scattered the proud in their conceit... cast down the mighty... lifted up the lowly...filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” This is a picture of power and a picture of transformation. A different kind of world where justice, rather than fear, reigns.

But we can't forget how outlandish what he is saying actually is. Its just outlandish for Jesus to claim to be God's anointed. And its outlandish to claim that the very *being* of God coming among us is *specifically* understood to be that which relieves the oppressed, heals the broken-hearted, declares freedom for the enslaved, and offers second chances. *That this is God's very nature.* That this justice-seeking is God's nature when humanized in the world. It is integral to God's properties and we are its heartbeat, sent to do its work. Which, incidentally, is as good a working theology of baptism as I've heard.

So we're on to something big here. According to one reading of this scripture, we are washed of our sins and old life in baptism, and reborn through Christ into a new life of light—of being the light of God in the world. Going into dark places, both our own and that around us, and putting something on the line. And in doing this we are not alone and we have tools. Each other and prayer chief among them. The Apostle Paul today contributes one of my favorite Advent instructions, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. ... test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

Today we stand on the banks of the Jordan. It's hot. We're not entirely sure what it all means But there is a man, John, hearing people confessing the secret pain of their lives and baptizing, promising them a new kind of life. He looks like a freak, is unkempt and unwashed. Its rumored he is ritually unclean, not kosher, eating locusts, wearing the skin of cattle. Everything about him is all wrong, except people are flocking to this incredible, surprising good news of a promised new life. Suddenly, the police are questioning him, and we hear him say, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not

know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." And we look around, and turn to one another and say, "Wow, someone here, someone among us will change the world!" Someone is coming. Let's keep watch.

In the Spirit of the God of Isaiah, who makes straight a path in our hearts, in this same Spirit of Christ who is the light breaking into our darkness and freeing us to love, Amen.