

Sunday, December 4, 2011

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1–11
Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13
2 Peter 3:8–15a
Mark 1:1–8
Year B

I.N.I.

Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus.

It's hard work, but necessary. Cleaning out the unfettered growth in our yard in the Mount Carmel section of Hamden. In our house hunting during the summer of 2010, where we saw 16 houses in two days, we were thrilled to find the house we were able to buy on such a large lot. We were excited to know that previous to our move in the Fall a year ago, the former residents Millie and Tom planted wonderful perennials all over, daffodils, lily of the valley, peonies, and count them 160 hostas. And more landscaping to cover and color our titled estate, named by Millie and Tom **hosta la vista** (160 hostas, view of Sleeping Giant): pussywillow, butterfly bushes, rose of Sharon, wild roses, holly bushes, burning bushes, azaleas, forsythia, and more where that came from.

But now that I'm back from the Holy Land, when I have a day to be outside and outside is not pouring down rain or snow, we clean up. We clear out. Dead heads are lopped off. What was green and pointing to the sky is now brown and limp and decaying on the ground. We have to make room for next year's growth. If we do not, then even Mother Nature will clutter things up. And given the number of yard waste bags we have filled, clutter happens anyway.

My Advent is connected to my physical laboring with late fall yard work. Clearing away clutter inside and out, so that new growth can spring forth. It's hard work, but necessary.

I was the inspiration for a mural by noted Lutheran artist Richard Caemmerer, Jr.. He was an art professor at Valparaiso University for many years, and his biggest commercial claim to fame was designing the Budweiser beer label. Caemmerer left full-time teaching in the 1980's to form an artists' guild in Washington State, and has been a liturgical design consultant for many churches. I took a mini course from him in seminary. In those days, during Advent as it was, I was preparing the recitative and aria from the Messiah in a classroom in the seminary, "Comfort Ye" and "Ev'ry Valley." I was to sing at my field education site on Sunday. And Caemmerer heard me, and decided that our class project was to create Isaiah's prophecy on the wall of the Chapel.

Gradually throughout Advent the mural emerged. Valleys ascended into mountains. High jagged peaks were crashing down. And a single line cut between them, the highway of our God.

Here was this glorious painting from Richard Caemmerer, making connections between Scripture, Song, Art, and our community's emerging Advent spirituality. It was very cool. Caemmerer had a crazy idea, though. He made our class promise that after he left, during Lent, the mural would disappear. As the spectacular images slowly emerged during Advent, our class would assure that the colorful and bold landscape would in like manner recede during Lent. Oh, the administration was not pleased with this idea. Caemmerer himself had to throw in some extra paintings to seal the deal.

Today there is an invitation to clear the clutter that goes something like this "Prepare the way of the Lord: make his paths straight." Or it may even come in a single word, **repent**.

One voice behind the invitation is John the Baptizer, speaking in tones like the prophets of days gone by: Isaiah, Elijah, and Malachi. John cuts through the clutter, not crying out in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem, but where, in the desert, in the wilderness, where there's nothing but rocks and sand, where it's so quiet that you have to deal with your thoughts, where your normal course of activity is brought to a halt. The wilderness is the perfect place to start over, repent, clear out the clutter, inside and out. In this Advent activity that cuts against the grain, rails away at the power of culture and politics, business is no longer as usual. Something new can break through. Seeing images that stir your imagination, decluttering your stuff, listening to prophetic voices, finding yourself in the desert, all these can lead to a place to meet God, who is Christ, makes all things new.

Holy encounter is what I want you to notice. Mark's writing calls it *good news*. With no baby in the crib like Luke or Matthew, no cast of characters like Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, or magi at the start of things, the advent here, now, starts thus: ***the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God***. Without wasting any time, the point of the story is right there in the beginning. The gospel meaning *good news* is not a literary genre in this case, it is the experience in the telling and the living and the receiving and the believing. It is the encounter in the desert prompting repentance. It is John the Baptist announcing the strength of Jesus' power with the Hebraism of his own humility *not worthy to stoop down and untie his shoelaces*. This is big. You think John is wild? You think John is compelling? With his back to nature dress code and insect diet, you think John captures the attention of the whole Judean countryside and Jerusalem? Just wait!

The next act is even wilder, even more compelling, captures all sorts of attention. The anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ who comes will himself embody this sea change that prophets dreamed about and that John the Baptizer prepared for! The good news is Jesus Christ start to finish, coming to set the world to rights, to breathe peace, to forgive sin, to cast out demons, to arrive at the grave and then to leave it empty. This is the Advent of our God. This is the story, our story, our good news to tell and live and receive and believe.

So much clutter. Countries and families in turmoil. Hustle and bustle in congregations and communities.

And yet, and yet, the psalmist declares *righteousness and peace have kissed each other*. And I have seen it. In this landscape of a painting by John August Swanson, a copy which was a gift to

me, the furrows are rainbow colored. There is not clutter, or death, but growth. Truth springs from the earth in a form of a tree that is watered at its base, and provides a home for birds and a playground for a child in its tops. The Advent of our God, like Christ here now before and after everything is said this way: *faithfulness shall spring up from the earth*. In this dark and bleary late Fall, we can see this brightness of God's justice. And in the corner, where not much else is happening, two running women with bouncing hair extend their arms to one another. A banner of psalmist's words integrated with the color scheme is printed below: *justice and peace shall kiss*.

I have also seen righteousness and peace kissing, in the flesh. One evening during last month's trip to Palestine/Israel, a Muslim originally from Ireland named Moira came by cab from Shuafat, a neighborhood in East Jerusalem and waited with us in the community room in our guest house. Fifteen minutes later Rami, an Israeli from West Jerusalem zoomed in on his motorcycle. When Rami arrived, he warmly greeted what he called his sister. They embraced in front of our group that traveled to the Holy Land to find God in the embroiled flesh of a conflicted people. There God was, in our guests who came at our invitation.

The two, Rami and Moira, sat down, each prepared to tell their stories of violent death. Rami's daughter was murdered by a suicide bomber in a café. Moira's husband was shot by an Israeli soldier as he traveled back from Friday prayer. The two got quickly to the point: only in the sharing of pain can promise emerge. Only in clearing out the rage and anger that clutters can something new spring forth. They both lost loved ones, and discovered in a community of those living the stories of pain and telling the stories of loss, that a commitment to peace and a new way brings new rays of hope and dare I say resurrection.

We could see it in their faces. We could feel it in their intentionally paced sharing a very intimate and tragic story. They were given new life in finding each other and creating a group of Bereaved Families. They were proclaiming new life with us six Lutherans who were willing for an evening, to clear the clutter and find that in Israel/Palestine, in the late fall of 2011, God can and will do a new thing. *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*.

Rami and Moira were righteousness and peace kissing each other. By the time they were leaving, well we just had to embrace them, too.

My friends, the landscape is changing right in front of us. God in Christ comes to us in the flesh, ready to bring peace and reconciliation to repentant hearts. Clear that path in whatever way seems best to you. And be ready to welcome Christ when he comes, even in an embrace with righteousness and peace.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

I.N.I.