

NEW WAYS OF THINKING
The Third Sunday of Advent, Year A – December 15, 2019
The Rev. Cooper Conway

Arthur Hultgren of the Lather Seminary once said, “these days we live in a world where people are divided into two categories—those who are valued and those who are not valued—but Advent introduces an opening to New Ways of Thinking.” And at no time is that more true than on the Third Sunday of Advent when we both recite the Magnificat (Mary’s Prayer) and hear today’s Gospel.

The Gospel this morning breaks down into roughly 3 sections:

- It begins with a question which John the Baptist sends to Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come?”
- It moves on to Jesus’ answer which is sent back: “Go tell John what you have seen.”
- And finally Jesus poses his own question to the gathered crowd: “What did you come to the wilderness to see? He gives three alternatives:

“A reed shaken by the wind?” (In other words, did you come all this way to seek the obvious? Every river like the Jordan has reeds.)

“Someone dressed in fine robes?” (Like a familiar wealthy, worldly leader?)

And finally, “Did you come to find a prophet?” (This, Jesus assures them, John the Baptist certainly is.)

In his three-part question, Jesus makes it clear that he believes John’s followers are not looking for obvious answers, nor the old way of solving problems through power, but rather for the type of guidance which Israel has not experienced for over 400 years with the death of their last prophet, Malachi. The people are looking for the direct line to God which the prophets of old had offered and that John, most recently has offered again to them. John, who is the towering figure of Advent, introduces (for the people of Israel) an opening to new ways of thinking.

The people are seeking what they had been promised by the prophets of old: a Messiah, an anointed one. And at first many think this is John himself. Then John thinks it is Jesus but when he is imprisoned, John wavers and sends word to ask Jesus, “Are You the One?”

And then Jesus reminds John’s group that they have found their prophet and that their prophet is true...their prophet has spoken rightly when he named Jesus as the chosen one. Jesus reminds the followers that through John, God has “created an opening into new ways of thinking,” and it is time to drop their “either/or” thinking which divides people into two categories.

It makes me think of a story I read recently by Daniel Sokatch who is a blogger for the *Times* of Israel. He took this moment in history to reflect on something which happened to him 15 years ago in Los Angeles at a Jewish Community Center where he ran the Social Justice Center arm of that institution.

The JCC hosted a number of programs that summer: a day camp for local Jewish kids, social services for people of the area, and a daily lunch program for seniors both Jewish and non-Jewish. One of the people who came to that lunch program was an elderly African American gentleman...“I liked it when he showed up,” Sokatch said, “because he was an accomplished Jazz pianist and when he had finished lunch, he would sit at the old piano in the auditorium and play.”

Now Sokatch and this man never spoke but they knew one another by sight and would often smile and nod from a distance...till one day it rained, no, not just rained, it poured! And the noise level in the JCC rose to a cacophony as the rain bounced off the roof of the old building and the children who were confined indoors ran and shrieked. It was on that day that Daniel first actually met the aging pianist when they found themselves side by side at the sinks in the bathroom.

Each smiled at the other in the mirrors and then Daniel said “pretty loud today.” “Yes,” the man agreed. “Guess you won’t be able to play today--too loud to hear the music,” Daniel continued with a wince.

“Doesn’t bother me,” the older man told him. “What’s your secret?” Daniel asked. “It’s driving me crazy. “Well,” the man began, “you see, I was in the war (WWII, that is), I was part of what they called “a Negro Battalion serving in Germany, and we were the first to liberate Dachau. I’ll never forget what I saw there. So, to hear Jewish children laughing and playing is music to my ears.”

Then, he smiled again and said, “You have a good day, son” and walked away.

“I stood there at the sink for a while,” Daniel writes, “staring at my own reflection. I had been so proud that my Jewish community had been able to provide hot lunches to an elderly man. It never occurred to me that he was a rescuer of that Jewish community, a liberator to whom we owed so much more than a free meal.”

Then Sokatch goes on: “I think about him today and about all the kids at JCCs and synagogues and churches all over America and I think about two African-Americans gunned down in Louisville and the eleven Jews murdered at the Tree of Life in Pittsburgh and about what it means to be allies and to stand up strong and united against the evil that confronts us.”

So...remember today, on Advent III, that in today’s Gospel, Jesus reminds the gathered crowds that through John, the prophet, “God has introduced an opening into new ways of thinking” and that it is time for them to drop their “either/or” viewpoint which divides people into two categories (those who are valued and those who are not.)

This is the Gospel message we receive today! And sadly it is one that we still need to hear. As people of good will, we are not called to seek the obvious nor the old power-structure answers to life’s challenges. As Christians, we are called to seek the way of the Jewish prophet, John, who shares an opening to new ways of thinking which bring us together in peace and love, allies, standing up strong and united against the evil that confronts us.

Amen.