

Which Lord are you Preparing For?

The Reverend Deborah Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Second Sunday of Advent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary
December 7, 2008

The focus in the gospel today (as well as next week) is on John the Baptist. As the Feast of Christmas is coming, you may well wonder ‘why’? Shouldn’t we be hearing about Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph, about encounters with angels and foretold births? What does John—a grown-up John—have to do with Christmas? Well, actually, plenty.

Christmas—or the Nativity of our Lord—is all about God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus. At Christmas, we welcome the arrival of Jesus as an infant, as a vulnerable human being. But Jesus is also known as Lord—the name used by God even back to the days in the Old Testament (“Thus says the Lord your God”). And such a name connotes a powerful or important person, one whom you would pay particular attention to, or if receiving him/her, spend time preparing for. John’s presence in Advent is a reminder of that—Jesus as Lord, the Son of God, coming into the life of the world and changing it forever. Surely, people need to be prepared for that—well, as prepared as one can be.

So John does his best to “prepare the way of the Lord.” He preaches that the people must return to God; repent, or start in a new direction, leaving their old ways behind. He baptizes with water as a sign perhaps of purification, or maybe as a commitment to the Jewish faith that already marks their identity. Prepare yourselves, he proclaims; the Lord is coming.

The question is however, which Lord were they preparing for?

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The people had long waited for a savior, the Messiah, the perfectly anointed one, who would make all things right, who would lead them like a good shepherd. A ruler who was wise and righteous, one who kept God's law and who had God's favor. A king from the line of David, the king whom God loved and had promised lineage to. Most likely someone educated, or someone who associated with the religious leaders of the day. Someone powerful, a winner, someone who would stand up to the pagan Romans and tell them that they would defile God's land no more. This supposed Prince of Peace might have to lead a few battles first to get to that peace, but with God on his side, victory was assured. That was the Lord they had been waiting for these hundreds of years.

It seems, however, that the people had forgotten a few facts along the way—especially regarding beloved David. David, who was the youngest of his brothers, who had to be called in from tending the sheep at Samuel's request. David, who came from humble beginnings, not a palace. David, who beat Goliath of the Philistines no so much by his power and force, but through his faith in God. Instead, David and the kings of old were remembered for their wealth and power and success—all gained because they were favored by God, of course (so it was assumed).

So it is not surprising that the people did not recognize the Lord when he came. A baby born in a stable. A mother whose pregnancy most likely caused village gossip's tongues to wag. A child from a carpenter's home, in a small backwater village in Galilee (not even Judea!). A man who was a carpenter himself, who then began a life of preaching and teaching at an age when most men should be married and settled down. He embraced outsiders, for heaven's sake—didn't he

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know they were unclean or sinners? His disciples were hardly an inspiring lot—fisherman and a tax collector among them. Sure, he was popular with the poor and oppressed but that was hardly going to get him anywhere, right? And sure enough, look where he wound up—crucified, accused of blasphemy and treason.

Hardly the Lord that the people of Israel had been expecting. And that, my friends, is the point.

A God who we can define, a God who we can wholly predict, is not God. That being, whoever it is, is merely a projection of ourselves. We hear the name Lord and/or King, and we think noticeable, powerful, influential. We do not expect one who is vulnerable, weak, one who serves to the point of a shameful death. And yet that is who Jesus was, and is, even today.

The Lord of all comes to us through so many ways in our lives today. The homeless person on the street corner, the face of the refugee on the news, the wounded or slain innocents in the battles of the African plain. He is there, in and with the ill or dying in a hospital bed; look for him in the hollow eyes of a starving child, listen for him in the cry of one who has suffered the loss of a child or family member to untold violence. Anywhere where there is someone who is vulnerable, broken, isolated, or shunned—he is there. And he calls us to look for him there, in the hard places.

It is difficult, this awareness. We would much rather prepare ourselves to receive Jesus the King, Jesus all cleaned up, with a crown upon his head and clean robes, and comforting words.

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For it is easy to see God in those we love or those most like us. And God is there too—in you, and in me. But God asks us to always keep alert, to be prepared for the unexpected, to look for the Lord in the most unlikely places—places like a manger, places like a cross. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God teaches us that we are called to lives of love, being vulnerable to and for one another; to lives where our weakness is transformed into God's strength, to lives of service, serving one another as we would serve God, for indeed we are.

Prepare yourselves—the Lord is coming. Will you recognize him?

Amen.