

2 Advent B 2011

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

John the Baptist was here last week –
As annoying as ever.

He was waiting for me
At the bottom of the front steps
when I arrived at 20 minutes past 8
last Sunday morning.

He was dressed as you might expect,
And got right in my face,
As you might expect –
And still, it took me until the middle of the week
To realize who it was
Who had made me so impatient,
And annoyed,
And, as I turned to go,
So doubtful and pensive.

I recognize him now,
Because he called me to repentance.
He caused me to turn around and look at myself.
Really.
I'm not sorry I didn't give him the \$12
He insisted I should give him;
I'm not sorry I cut him off
After he had flooded me with scripture and scolding for 5 minutes.
But I am sorry that as I see myself in that encounter with him
I see now –
I saw even as I walked away –
those places within me where there is no room
to welcome the stranger.

And so I recognize him –

The one who calls us to repent,
To turn around,
So that when the unexpected, long expected one comes,
we will be ready,
and the way will be prepared.

This is an old story,
Even though it happened in this particular way
Just a week ago today.

I have heard it before,
And I have told it before.
And so have you.

I once met Christ the King
In the checkout line
At the Capitol Hill Whole Foods,
Back when it was Alfalfa's.
In his presence,
One of my worst faults was laid bare,
And I knew
That I was standing before the great judgment seat of Christ.

A few weeks ago,
Someone brought me a picture of Mary, the Mother of God,
Incarnate as Safia Adem,
A Muslim woman from Somalia,
Mourning the death from starvation of her young son, Hamza.
Right there in the Denver Post, I saw the Pieta
weeping again
As she did at the foot of the cross.

A friend of mine rode the Number 15 bus
With Jesus for three months,
Eastbound on Colfax,
Late at night.
Then one night his eyes were opened
And he recognized him –
And immediately,

The man he knew for Jesus
Got off at the next stop,
And never returned.

They come to meet us,
Day by day,
The prophets and holy ones,
The messengers of God
Sent to preach repentance
And prepare the way for our salvation.

They must have almost infinite patience,
Because they keep coming back;
They keep bringing the same message,
And we keep believing that this time maybe we will get it.
And in fact, once in a while we do.
We hear the voice of John the Baptist.
We receive the righteous judgment of Christ the King.
We see Mary, still weeping.
Our eyes are opened,
And we recognize Jesus.

But then he gets off the bus,
And is gone.

We cannot hold the moment.
We are not ready.
The way is still rough
And full of bumps.
There is no highway through the desert yet.

Make straight in the desert
A highway for our God.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd
And gently lead them.

Yes, we hear music in the background
Whenever we speak again those familiar, lovely words,
Words of comfort, words of hope.

We know them all so well,
We might even think
That the way was straight,
And a room prepared
So that God would feel at home.

We sing the music,
And light our candles,
And keep away the darkness
When the nights grow long.
We know all the ways to welcome
The one who is coming.

And still, we are not ready
For him to stay.
We are only ready for the baby to be born.

If he stays in the manger,
We know just what to do.
But once he's out and about,
Riding the bus and judging us in the checkout line,
We are not ready to receive him.

So they keep coming back,
The prophets and holy ones
To bring us the message once again,
And then again, and again.
Get ready,
So you can welcome him when he comes.

Repent.
Turn around,
So that you can see.
They keep pointing,
Saying,
Here is your God!

And we keep saying,
Where?

Where is God?
When will the good news begin?
When will the good news be told
In a way we can understand?

The good news begins now.
And it's John the Baptist who brings it.

At least, that's how it seems to me,
Now that I've seen him and heard his voice so recently.

It was not comfortable or pleasant,
That encounter with the last, harsh prophet.
It left me shaken.
And – it showed me where and for what
I might do a little repenting.

It's hard work.
Some of you have done this work,
The slow, painful work
That is not just feeling sad and sorry,
But walking into the dark places of your souls
And examining what you find there,
Holding it up to the light,
Seeking understanding,
And praying for the strength, and grace,
To change.

That's the kind of turn around
That brings us face to face with God.
That's the kind of housecleaning
That makes room for a guest.
That's the kind of welcome
That makes a stranger feel at home.

This is what God is waiting for.
This turnaround is the beginning of the good news.

Until we do this,
All of us,
There is no room for Jesus to stay.

Yes, he can be born.
But he has no room to grow
Unless we make room inside ourselves,
Inside our communities,
And at the center of our world.

So the work of Advent,
The work the prophets call us to,
Is the work of stretching ourselves
To make room for the one who is coming.

It's a stretch for some of us
To think and speak about repentance.
It's a stretch to listen
When the prophets call to us.
It's hard work
To make a highway in the desert.
Someday, we will be ready.
Someday, the rough places will be plain.

Until then,
The good news will keep on beginning.
It will begin at the beginning
As many times as we need it to.

Jesus will come again, soon,
No matter what.

He is already on his way,
And nothing can stop him from being born.

The question is,
Will there be room for him yet?

Someday, he won't have to lie in the manger.

Someday, there will be room in the inn.
We will have made everything ready,
And the best room will be waiting.

Our hearts will open and stay open.
Like Mary,
We will find a place within ourselves,
Where God can be born.
That will happen, someday.

For now, it is enough that the good news is beginning again.
We can start over with it,
Just as soon as we turn around.

The prophets are calling.
Let's listen.