

The Still Point
A Time of Meditation and Reflection
Third Sunday of Advent

... At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance...

T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*

Peace on each one who comes in need;
Peace on each one who comes in joy.
Peace on each one who offers prayers;
Peace on each one who offers song.
Peace of the Maker, Peace of the Son,
Peace of the Spirit, the Triune One.

Opening Prayer

Come, O come Emmanuel,
you are the way, the truth and the life;
Come, living Savior
come to your world which waits for you.
Hear this prayer for your love's sake.
Amen.

The Gospel

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John

answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Poem: " From Locusts and Wild Honey"

By Dante Mischeaux

On a lesser diet than that of the wretched
rests a prophecy: some of us come to prepare.
I stood before my god, at a foreign altar,
and promised to guide you; me, with my heretic
theology. I practice the ways passed to me
by descendants of followers of a wild man:
followers in the desert downwind of his musk,
listening to him confess himself unfit to
loose latchets on shoes; they believed his words holy,
ignored bits of insect wing in his beard. And then,
he told them of a dove that no one else could see.
I have learned to retain my head while speaking truth.

From "Theologies for Korah"

Meditation

This week's gospel, like last week's, invites us to consider the complex, perhaps uncongenial mission and ministry of John the Baptist. John harangues the crowds who come out to hear him, calling them a brood of vipers, and proclaiming the coming of divine wrath. In contrast to the dramatic fire and brimstone he preaches, however, his actual advice is focused on simple justice: share with those in need, do not exploit the weak, or abuse power. John's ultimate vocation, though, is not to dispense maxims or prophecy the end times, but to proclaim the coming of the holy one of God, whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. It seems ironic, when we consider John's words, that the gospel writer calls these exhortations good news. But the heart of the good news is the heart of his message: prepare, because God's anointed one is on the way.

The poem picks up many of the details that stick in our minds when we think of John: the smell of his clothes, the shoelaces, the “bits of insect wing in his beard.” But of the essence, again, is the mission of John. The poet, perhaps, sees this mission less in terms of proclaiming the coming of the holy one, as heralding the beginning of a reign of justice, where goods are shared equitably, and power yields to compassion. The poet practices, it seems, these way of justice, “the ways passed to me/by descendants of followers of a wild man.” The anointing of the holy one, by “a dove that no one else can see,” becomes not the culmination of his mission, but a deflection from it. By contrast, the poet has “learned to keep my head while speaking truth.”

Questions for Reflection

What is most important to you about John the Baptist? When do you find him difficult? Can you imagine going out into the wilderness to encounter him and listen to him preach?

In the extended poem of which “From Locusts and Wild Honey” is the first part, the poet reflects on different aspects of a personal theology described as “heretic.” Many of us claim various parts of our own theologies to be heretical and derive meaning from identifying them as outside the perceived mainstream. Do you have personal beliefs, important to you, that you suspect would be called heretical? What do they contribute to your life in faith? Would you ever share them with someone in conversation?

Where do you see good news in the gospel passage?

Prayers

We bring before God someone whom we have met or remembered today

We bring to God someone who is hurting tonight and needs our prayer

We bring to God a troubled situation in our world

We bring to God, silently, someone whom we find hard to forgive or trust

We bring ourselves to God that we might grow in generosity of spirit, clarity of mind, and warmth of affection

We offer our thanks to God for the blessings in our lives

We name before God those who have died.

Gracious God, you hear all our prayers: those we speak aloud, those we hold in our hearts, and those prayers for which we have no words. Hear the prayers of your people, and grant them as may be best for us, for the sake of your holy name. **Amen.**

Accept our thanks for all you have done, O God. Our hands were empty, and you filled them.

May Christ's holy, healing, enabling Spirit be with us every step of the way, and be our guide as our road changes and turns, and the blessing of God our Creator, Redeemer and Giver of life be among us now and remain with us forever. **Amen.**

Poem and Reflection offered by: Rev'd Elizabeth Randall