

Second Sunday of Advent
Sermon for December 9, 2007

Raymond Raney

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7,18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.”

“Rejoice...the root of Jesse shall rise ... and in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

Repent and Rejoice. To our ears those two words may sound like contradictions.

Repent? Doesn't that mean feeling guilty and telling God I'm sorry. It's all about guilt isn't it? Rejoice we get. That's just being happy, right?

Repent! That's like one of those signs in cartoons held up by some guy in a long beard and a ragged robe standing on the street corner telling everyone that the end is near. It's the end of the world.

Actually, Repent! Doesn't mean saying you're sorry. It doesn't mean confessing your sins. It doesn't mean that you're preparing for the end of the world, or even the end of your life. It means changing the way you live.

The Greek word translated as repent is *metanoia*. Literally it translates as “after mind.” In meaning, repent means altering your mind, turning around, going in a new direction. To repent in Christian terms means opening your heart and mind to the will of the Holy Spirit, and moving in a new direction. Repent means choosing to live a new life.

When I was growing up, in the church I was raised in, repenting meant turning your life over to Jesus, of making a profession of faith, of saying particular words at a particular time and being baptized into a new life. But for me it was just words. I had these feelings over and over again of feeling guilty, of never being good enough, of not being able to live up to the promise, the words I'd said kneeling at the altar rail. I was never, would never, could never be good enough.

What I've learned in the year between then and now is that it's not about words, it's about actions. Saying I'm sorry about what I've done doesn't mean anything unless I change the actions that led to the way I behaved. I had to choose to change, and pray that God would grant me the strength to do what I wanted to do. It would be easier if we just said the words and didn't worry about it. But it's not that easy.

That's why John the Baptist is giving the Pharisees such a hard time: "You brood of Vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath." The Pharisees would say the words. They would feel guilty. They would do what the law required of them. But they would never change the way they lived. They would never make the big turn. They would never alter their minds and lives to live in accordance to the will of God. And so they, like many of us, might repent in words, but without the life-changing actions of choosing to live the life God has given us to live, they, like us, could never rejoice.

Rejoice is not an easy thing to do. Rejoice means being in touch with the joy God gives those who are attuned to the Holy Spirit. Rejoice is that song that cannot be stilled. The Joy that fills our hearts to bursting. It's waking up in the morning and bounding out of bed breathing in the cool, clean air of love and joy and wonder that God would bless us with the creation that surrounds us.

Rejoice, we are told by Paul, and urged that God may fill us "with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

I took comfort in that admonition this weekend when I flew back to Indiana for the funeral of my favorite Aunt, Mardell. She had died unexpectedly, apparently as she slept. She had not been ill or in declining health. Her children gathered round in her home with their children, and Mardell's nieces and nephews gathered with them. Those who gathered to mourn with her family filled the room.

I was honored to be asked to deliver the eulogy, and it was easy because Mardell had been the light in so many lives. She had been the bright morning star in our lives. She was always encouraging, providing an affirmative word, sharing a genuine happiness in the accomplishment of each of us. She was proud of her children and her grandchildren, and she was present for her friends and her coworkers. She was involved in the lives, and her smile was infectious. She was one of those people who lit up a room. She was filled with the hope that life was good and we could make it better. She had a passionate desire to understand and search out meaning, to strive to improve her knowledge. That was the legacy she left her children: to learn, to travel, to experience life.

As I concluded my words I told my family and her friends that Mardell had succeeded in the job God had given her to do with this life. The same job that each of us is given when we are born. Mardell left this world better than she found it. Each of the lives she touched were bettered by the experience of her life. She was a wonder. She lived a life filled with hope for the future.

That is the hope we all strive for. A hope not diminished to the level of wishing for the future, but hope wrapped in the certainty that the Kingdom of God is possible. That we can and will work for the kingdom where peace will reign.

A couple of weeks ago, I asked what peace was. It has to be more than just the absence of war and violence. It has to be more than just the cessation of the agonies of hate and aggression. It has to be more than the deterrence of mutual force.

Our reading from Isaiah this weeks gives us what the Peace of God might feel like. It's hard to imagine but I think the prophet's words capture what we might hope for.

The world shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
The calf and the lion and the fatling together,
And a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
Their young shall lie down together,
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
And the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
As the waters cover the sea.
On that day the root of Jesse shall stand
As a signal to the peoples;
The nations shall inquire of him,
And his dwelling shall be glorious.

The vision is not a vision of the kingdom of heaven, but of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Isaiah envisions a time when we will live in justice and peace in a relationship with God that teaches us how to take care of one another.

That's the second coming, when the Christ will defend the needy, rescue the poor, and crush the oppressor, and the reign of righteousness will live as long as the sun and moon endure. Goodness will come down like rain and water the earth, and there will be an abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

That's quite a promise. That's something to hope for. Mardell would have liked that idea, and I think that's something she would urge us to seek. That kingdom is a kingdom worth working for.

Repent for the kingdom of God has come near, John says. And I tell you what Mardell would have told you, Jesus is coming, don't just look busy, get to work. Make this world a better place while you still have a chance to make a difference here and now.