

ARE WE THERE YET?

In the prayer of the day, we asked God to open our ears to the preaching of John. Well, were your ears opened? Did you hear what he called you? A brood of snakes? Oh, wait a minute. John was talking to the crowd there 2000 years ago, wasn't he? And what was the makeup of that crowd? Luke tells us that there were tax collectors there. Tax collectors were usually Jews working for the Roman government. Not only did they take money from the people for their oppressors, but they often took more than the tax itself, they added a cut for themselves. John tells them "take no more than the amount prescribed." There were even soldiers there. We don't know if these were Roman soldiers, non-Jewish pagan worshipping Romans, or if they might have been the equally hated temple police who made sure that the locals gave their temple taxes regularly and enforced strict levitical laws. John tells them, "don't extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages. Yeah, this crowd is nothing like us! We're not cheats or scoundrels. We don't oppress the poor. And, as far as I know, there's not even an IRS agent among us! So no brood of vipers are we. We're Christians. We have Jesus as our ancestor!

That's exactly why the Church in it's wisdom asks us to pray "Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the preaching of John." If John the Baptist were hear among us today, he would probably say, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Jesus as our ancestor' for I tell you God is still able to take stones from the earth and make them children of God. The Messiah still baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, unquenchable fire that burns off the chaff from each harvest of human life." How many of us have not only two coats in our closet, a coat for daytime and a coat for evening, but a coat for each season of the year; coats to match each new outfit that clogs our closets? Maybe we are a little more like that crowd than we originally thought. Maybe we are just a brood of snakes. Maybe we ought to ask the question John's crowd asked, "what then shall we do?"

It's not just about coats. It's not even just about money. It's about how we live our lives. After John took the crowd down a notch (just like hills being made low,) he told them something very important. Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Remember? We prayed about that too this morning. "Open our ears to the preaching of John that.....we may bring forth the fruits of repentance. Remember that the Greek word for repentance means to "turn around." Make a 180 degree turn. Turn away from the things that are comfortable and self-satisfying and look at the world around us. Take a good look. Look at the neighbor who just lost the last job in the household, whose house is in jeopardy, who has had to, for the first time in their life, go to a food pantry to make sure their family is fed. Take a look around at the child in parts of our city who cries each morning before going to school because they don't know if this is the day a bullet will graze them like it did their classmate last week. Take a good look at the person you have passed almost every day on the way to the train or the bus who always has a cup in hand asking for spare change. You have always told yourself that they would only use any money you give them to buy alcohol or drugs. But look a second time at them. Before begging, before addiction, before times got tough, they were probably not too different than either one of us. And now is about the time that you might just be saying, "but they will still use my spare change for a

drink.” But I don’t live in the neighborhood where that child is aching to stay home from school today. But I certainly can’t pay the mortgage for my neighbor whose house is in foreclosure.
BUT.....

There is a small community of Christians. Over 100 years ago they grew from just a handful of believers to number hundreds and hundreds of members. Now they are just over 200. The old families that used to make up the congregation have died or moved away and now they are outnumbered by people who have come from other places. But what an amazing ministry they have! Sounds a bit like Resurrection Lutheran Church in Lakeview, huh? It might be. But I want you to know about Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem in the Holy Land. Started by German Lutheran missionaries in 1885 and now a community of Arabic-speaking Lutherans, this congregation of just over 200 very poor people have an amazing story. In the 1967 war when the Israelis took the West Bank, the city of Bethlehem was bombed many times. And in 2002, when Muslim Palestinians were at the height of terrorizing the Israelis, Bethlehem was bombed again. Muslim fighters, taking refuge inside the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, that 1700 year old church build on what was said to be the site of Jesus’ birth, the Israelis shut the city of Bethlehem down for weeks. Pastor Mitri Rahab, the pastor of Christmas Church, heard glass breaking. It sounded like it came from the church. He was not allowed to leave his home for three days. Three agonizing days later, he was finally able to enter the church. Almost certain he would find the 100 year old stained glass windows shattered beyond repair, he found them all completely well. The only damage was a little hole in one window which the congregation decided to leave there as a reminder of their time of trial. Over the past 6 years, 3,000 Christian Arabs have left the Holy Land and many left Christmas Church. Now the Israelis have built their infamous wall around three sides of Bethlehem. One piece of the wall goes right down the middle of what used to be Main Street. Unemployment is at 60% and the average income is \$2 a day.

But over the past decade, Christmas Church has expanded, not diminished their ministry. Their 100 year old school has a new school building and teaches both Christian and Muslim children from pre-school through grade 12. The children learn Arabic, English, and Hebrew so that they can be prepared to live in a multiethnic society. And the school of 240 students learns to be children of peace in a chaotic world. Two years of post-secondary school has been added recently to teach Fine Arts and Communication. Fine Arts to enrich their community and train them to live in hope that one day the tourists will come back to Bethlehem and buy their olive wood carving, their painted icons and restore the businesses which sustained many in the Bethlehem community for hundreds of years. Christmas Church has a Wellness Center which provides minimum health care for the entire Bethlehem are because to get to the Lutheran hospital they depended upon for decades on the Mount of Olives, they must have a special permit to enter Israeli territory and go through three checkpoints. The Wellness Center includes a peaceful garden for prayer and meditation and a swimming pool for the elderly to swim off their aches and for the children to swim off their fears. There is a Music Conservatory, and Artist’s Workshop, a Youth Center, a Guest House for pilgrim who come there from all over the world, a Restaurant and Gift Shop, and most important of all, the International Center of Bethlehem where Christians, Muslims **and Jews** can meet for conferences, retreats, seminars and summits to find new ways to bring peace.

“Stir up the **WILLS** of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the preaching of John that we may bring forth the fruits of repentance“ What, then, shall we do, Lord? How can we be like those Lutherans in Bethlehem? Can we possibly make a difference in life around us?

We can give extra, unneeded coats to those who don't have one. We can drop more than spare change in the cup of a stranger, instead seeing the hurting person inside there, give out of true love and care. We can visit the neighbor living in desperation to offer any knowledge we have to help and at least to let them know they do not have to fear alone. We can become active in organizations that aid those children who fear violence; that find decent housing for the homeless; that feed the hungry. We can email our governmental leaders to tell them we stand on the side of the poor. We can pray and more.....!

We can do great things! How, you ask?

There is one more phrase that I have not yet addressed in the Prayer of the Day. “Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the preaching of John, that, **REJOICING IN YOUR SALVATION**, we may bring forth the fruits of repentance.

Advent is a time of waiting in expectation. Last week, today, and even next Sunday, the Gospel, the Good News, is not a story about or a listening to the words of Jesus. It's all about John the Baptist. Even next Sunday, the only appearance of Jesus is in his mother's womb. But don't you see. These Gospel readings really are all about Jesus, whose sandals neither John nor we are worthy to untie. But it is our Baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection that has made it possible to repent.....turn around 180 degrees, hear the preaching of John, see the poor and lowly around us and lift them up from the valleys of fear and poverty and give them the hope, peace and love which sustains us through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.