

"John the Baptist and the Coming of the God of Peace":

Homily for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 9, 2001

The Community of Bread and Justice, Englewood Cliffs, NJ

"In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the reign of heaven is at hand!" It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: 'A voice of one crying out in the desert, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight God's paths." --Matthew 3:1-12

I'm glad to be here with the Community of Bread and Justice, which I have heard about for so long, and to reflect together with you on these powerful Advent readings during these terrible times.

For me, advent is a time to repent of our culture's sin of violence and war and to prepare for the coming of the God of peace and God's reign of nonviolence. What I'd like to do is say a word about September 11th, John the Baptist, Isaiah and how we are called to proclaim the coming of God's reign of nonviolence.

After September 11th, 2001, I started volunteering full time at the Family Assistance Center at the Armory, then at Pier 94, as coordinator of the chaplains, helping to supervise over 500 chaplains for the Red Cross. I personally consoled over 1500 relatives who lost loved ones at the World Trade Center attacks and escorted many to Ground Zero, and met hundreds of firefighters, rescue workers and police officers at Ground Zero. It's been a difficult and powerful experience.

Many have said to me that in the midst of their grief and tears that war will not bring back their loved ones. I think particularly of one mother whom I stood with at Ground Zero, who wept telling me about her thirty year old son who died. "I have no room for anger," she said. "I have been meditating on the families of the hijackers, and I only feel compassion for their pain and for the people of Afghanistan. Bombing innocent people in Afghanistan will not bring my son back or end my grief and ease my sorrow, only increase my grief and sorrow.

It's in the context of our war, the seven million refugees freezing in the Afghan mountains, the one million Iraqis dead from our sanctions, and the suffering of the Palestinians, that I hear the prophet John the Baptist this morning, and I'd like to comment on three aspects of our Gospel.

First, Advent is a time of repentance. The one question we are not allowed to ask nationally is why did September 11th happen? If we really study the question why, we will quickly uncover the pain and death we have caused throughout the world. The September 11th attacks happened because our government has quietly killed one million Iraqis since 1990 and continues to support the oppression and murder of Palestinians, as well as maintain a global economic system that starves millions of people to death each year. Now, our violence has come back home to us.

We have to repent of our violence, wars, greed, oppression of the poor, executions, 30,000 nuclear weapons, imperialism, and global domination.

John the Baptist calls us first of all to repent, to turn around completely, to change the direction in which we as a people are headed. We have to start practicing justice and peace, instead of institutionalizing injustice and war.

And John adds that we need to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, which I think means, we need to let God disarm our hearts of our violence and become people of peace and nonviolence and then create a new culture of justice and peace. We have to engage in deeds and actions that promote justice and peace at every level.

So the Gospel asks us this morning: how are we repenting of our culture of violence and war?

Second, Advent announces the coming of the Reign of God.

Since September 11th, the flag has been used to rally support for our obliteration of Afghanistan and the killing of thousands of more innocent people. We have been whipped up into a frenzy of blind patriotism, unanimous support for war, for using terrorism to fight terrorism, for supporting our culture of violence, fear, despair, and apathy.

John the Baptist enters the scene and points way beyond America and announces the coming of the reign of God. The reign of God, for me, is a reign of nonviolence, peace and justice for the poor. Advent calls us to look beyond America, renounce our wars, and announce and welcome God's reign of nonviolence.

This morning, the Gospel asks us: do we announce the coming of the reign of God, the coming of a new realm of nonviolence and justice? Are we welcoming it in our hearts and lives and actions?

Third, Advent means we too have to be a voice crying out in the wilderness.

John identifies himself as "a voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare a way for God.'" His call for repentance and his annunciation of the reign of God is ignored by the empire and the ruling powers, but on the margins of the world, in the desert, it attracts the poor and the marginalized. It is hard work, but that is his vocation.

We too need to be "voices crying out in the wilderness." This is not a comforting or consoling vocation, but in a world of war and destruction, we must be faithful to the nonviolent Jesus who summons us to love our enemies. So we too must be voices crying out in the wilderness of America: "Stop the war, stop the bombings, stop maintaining nuclear weapons, stop the sanctions on Iraq, stop oppressing the poor." The Gospel asks us this morning: Are you, like John the Baptist, a voice crying out in the wilderness?

Meanwhile, in the first reading from Isaiah chapter 11, we see a vision of God's reign of nonviolence, where there is "no harm or destruction on all God's holy mountain." In this nonviolent realm, the animals are reconciled, everyone is disarmed, and the children are safe. The scriptures proclaim today that God's reign is a reign of nonviolence and that God is a God of nonviolence. Advent invites us to prepare for this reign of nonviolence, by becoming people of nonviolence.

This morning, the scriptures ask us: Are we people of nonviolence? Do we believe in the God of peace and nonviolence? Dare we renounce our destruction and prepare for God's reign where there is no harm or destruction toward anyone?

This advent, we are called once again to call the nation to repent of our sin of violence, to become people of nonviolence, to worship the God of nonviolence and to welcome God's reign of nonviolence. That means we have to become prophets of nonviolence, like John and Isaiah, who prepare for Jesus, the Messiah of Nonviolence.

In the last few months, in an effort to do this, in an effort to help the church be a community of prophetic nonviolence, I've been traveling around the country, and speaking out for peace, and I want to conclude by sharing with you what I've been saying:

1. We need to: Stop the war, stop bombing of Afghanistan, stop the Star Wars plans, stop training terrorists at the School of the Americas, stop threatening Iraq, and pursue nonviolent ways to peace and justice for all people.
2. We need to tell everyone that there is no security or safety in war, nuclear weapons, bombing raids, missile shields, greed, or terrorist training schools, only in nonviolence, love, justice, compassion and the God of peace;
3. that, as Gandhi said, an eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind;
4. that violence in response to violence can only lead to further violence;
5. that state-sanctioned terrorism in response to terrorism will only lead to further terrorism;
6. that war is not the will of God; that war is never blessed by God;
7. that war is never justified; that there is no such thing as a just war; that peaceful means are the only way to a peaceful future and the God of peace.
8. that we need to dismantle every nuclear weapon and every weapon of mass destruction, and redirect those billions of dollars toward the hard work for a lasting peace through international cooperation for nonviolent alternatives; to promote interfaith dialogue; feed every child and refugee on the planet; lift the sanctions on Iraq and the international debt; support the Palestinian people; join the world court and international law; end poverty; protect the earth and show compassion toward every human being on the planet. Then we can get on with the task of abolishing war itself, and convert our culture of violence into a culture of nonviolence;
9. that as Christians, we are followers of the nonviolent Jesus which means that we are not a people who retaliate or seek revenge; but a people who love one another, love God and ourselves, and love our enemies.

My hope and prayer with you this advent is that we Christians can do as Isaiah, John and Mary say by becoming prophets, apostles and servants of God's nonviolence and welcome the God of peace into our midst.