

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Advent II-a

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On Being Subversive

Texts: Mark 1:1-8

Here comes John the Baptist! In the opening words of this extraordinary Gospel, John – dressed in camel’s hair eating grasshoppers (not drinking them), sounds quite odd – because he is. Mark notes that John was neither slave to fashion nor galloping gourmet because John subverts the customary ways of religion, fulfills the longings of the prophet Isaiah and raises our expectations of the advent of God’s chosen one, the Lamb of God.

John the Baptizer subverts the conventional view of longing for a Messiah. People are once again turning to a military solution to save themselves from their oppression and sufferings. John says no! Start with being changed yourself, and only then with others, and only then with the question of a Jewish state and the Romans. Start with what’s in front of your nose –start by measuring yourself against God’s expectations!

Yet Mark’s Gospel is subversive in a subtler way. The opening words in his Jesus book are “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Did you know that this wording is imitating the opening lines of the announcements of the Roman Caesars. The heralds would gather the people, willingly and unwillingly, and tell them of Caesar’s latest “good news”: whether a new emperor had been born or crowned, or to announce new taxes to fight his wars and build the glory of Rome.

Mark consciously borrows that opening and replaces “the good news of Caesar Augustus” with “the good news of Jesus Christ.” Many who heard this opening would make the connection –and this was seditious and subversive. Mark is saying, in effect, here is good news in contrast to the glories and arrogance of imperial Rome. Prepare yourself for a different way of living in this world.

But how is Mark’s subversion the advent of really good news for us?

Well first, let’s talk about what it is not. Lutheranism in the 1950’s and 60’s was often a kind of interiorized emotional grace preaching designed to make you feel good by first making you feel bad. We were told we were sinners and after we were tormented on the rack of guilt over breaking the commandments, which we are all quite good at doing, then we were offered a follow-up, the love of Jesus. You cannot forgive yourself. Only Jesus did by his death on the cross. So just accept your savior and what he has done for you.

Now while there is great truth in that language, what is missing is a deepening sense of the advent of subversion. By keeping all this religious experience inside us, interiorized as emotional feeling alone, the church abdicated any responsibility in challenging the injustices of the political order. We left the church *feeling* cleansed but we still wouldn't dream of integrating our fellowship, or letting women really lead even though they were the majority, or giving full welcome to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered children of God.

Where is true moral nurture for individual or society in this kind of preaching? While there were exceptional laity and clergy who ploughed the soil bravely and deeply, the general abdication to culturally assigned religious roles suited the governments of the Western nations quite well --religion is a private matter and is thus rendered harmless.

But for Mark, the good news he brings is not only deeply personal and deeply emotional --he also begins changing us into prayerful subversives of unjust structures and human pain. And this advent for change, this nurturing, is something political states from ancient Rome to our day do not like. Their power structures --unjust or not, crooked or not, are not to be tinkered with or challenged or the whole thing just might come tumbling down. Advent means subversion.

But on the other hand, Mark's good news of subversion is not a call to fanatic zealotry either. Jesus somehow is able to keep inside his tent Matthew, a Jewish tax collector for oppressive Rome, as well as Simon, a zealot bent on armed revolution against Rome. Just as Christianity can become interiorized into feelings, it can be exteriorized into ideological violence where any means justifies the end.

As Christians and as a faith community who hear Mark's subversive good news thundering through John the Baptist into our Advent of 2005, how are we to respond to the war in which we are now engaged as a nation? It is very difficult for us to ascertain the true facts to go to war in the decision making process of our government. On the one hand we doubt if we could ever know and, on the other, most of us understand how different issues can sometimes look when we have to make the decisions.

Our nation is at war now. Most followers of Jesus have held that wars can be justified as a last resort if they protect the people from aggression and peril. This case has been made for the current war --but is it built on the way of the lamb? It sounds like good news in the style of the Roman emperors --not of the lamb; a good news to those inebriated with exercising America's unchecked imperial power. The big brother to the family of nations has been turned into the bully on the block. Such is my sad perception of the state of affairs we live in. A friend and Washington lawyer told me that in Washington vision has gone and it's "grab all you can get."

Whether I am right or wrong, resorting to violence to do good is a most desperate action. You'll have to make up your own mind. But I do impress upon you that that our broken, bloodied and dead lamb is no mere trademark, no mere trinket. That little lamb is the icon, the doorway to riches of the heart and human community, not only for hearing good news but in making some too.

By engaging our families and neighbors to discover together what is good for the world and for the nation about this war; to bear witness to the subversive lamb who is about peacemaking, respecting the integrity of those who differ from us; we show we too want a world based not on uniformity of thought or practice, but on unity in diversity. Be subversives with faith, hope and love!

This is not a Pollyanna picture. It is childlike, but it doesn't have to be childish. It is simplicity itself, but it doesn't have to be simplistic. Mark's good news of Jesus Christ starts with John calling us from our self-absorption and ends with a crucified lamb who invites resurrection.

The not so good news, the subversive news of this Advent, is that the sirens of war have seduced people over and over again to arrogating power and force to impose a peace that has within it the seeds of its own destruction. The good news, the subversive news of this Advent, is that self-examination and peacemaking lead to longer lasting solutions. The good news is that we are walking on such a highway of peace and human redemption about which John could only dream. Bear the good news as you amble that road. Be subversives of the Lamb.

Amen

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