

Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent

Year A

December 9, 2007 Randal B. Gardner

An aging mother had four very successful sons. The grown boys got together to compare their Christmas lists, and being brothers they couldn't help being competitive with each other. One had been bragging about how he was building Mom a beautiful, spacious home in the country. To that another said he was having a state of the art theater room added to the house. The third brother said he had ordered a top line Mercedes to be delivered to her so she could get to town when she wanted. The youngest brother described having found a parrot that was able to recite the entire bible. All she had to ask was for a chapter or verse, and the parrot would be able to start in at once. He went on to mention that to keep the parrot in perfect recall, he had committed to a contract of \$25,000 a year for twenty years of continuing training.

The week after Christmas all the brothers got nice notes from their mother. To the eldest she wrote: "The new home is wonderful. After spending all the hours it takes to clean it I go back to my bedroom, the only room I really need when I live alone so many miles from everyone I know." To her other sons she wrote: "Thank you for the grand car. Since I gave up driving five years ago, I can only imagine how fun it would be to drive it." "Thank you for the fifty seat home theater room. Since most of my friends have died and I can no longer see, I can't tell you how I will enjoy using it."

To her youngest son she wrote: "Of all my sons, you seemed to think of a practical gift that I could really use. I can't recall ever having had a tastier chicken."

That's what you call ironic. Ironic also describes the appearance of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness.

Suppose a tall man walked in with a scruffy beard trimmed almost to his jawbone, wearing a black stove pipe hat. Who comes to mind? How about a wig of white hair tied into a pony tail in the back, wearing a general's uniform? How about a rotund man with a long white beard in a red suit trimmed with white fur? Some images are so tied to cultural history that just about any actor can wear a costume and seem to be that person.

When John the Baptist is described wearing camel skins and a leather belt and eating wild locusts, he has put on the costume of one of the great prophets of Israel. Elijah. And when someone dressed like Elijah seems to be a true prophet of the Lord, the last words of the Hebrew Scriptures seem to be coming true: "Behold I will send you Elijah to prepare for the Great and Awesome Day of the Lord."

What would it mean to evoke Elijah, to take up Elijah's mantle?

Elijah was the first of the great prophets who spoke out in the midst of the increasing injustice and abuses of the kings and rulers of Israel. While the Covenant of Moses created a society of equity and fairplay, the generations of kings and aristocratic privilege had turned Israel into a nation hardly distinguishable from the pagan states around it.

If one meant to remind the people of Elijah, it's likely that three things would come to mind. First: God gave Elijah spiritual power to do miracles every bit as astonishing as those Jesus would perform. He raised a boy from death; he called down fire from heaven; he caused the river Jordan to part before him. Elijah was a powerful man of God, and when people saw John dressed like Elijah, they probably remembered those stories.

Second: Elijah so roundly condemned and villified the king and the king's court for their unjust ways and their self serving practices of religion that he became the number one enemy of the state. Ahab and his queen Jezebel put a bounty on his head, but in the end God caused Ahab and Jezebel to fall while protecting Elijah. John would probably have reminded the people that prophets do not get along well with authority figures and often stir them to animosity. For people like the Jews in Jesus' day, John might have seemed like a welcome voice to those who were oppressed and a terrifying threat to those in power.

Because the third thing Elijah did was put in motion a violent coup that took the life of every member of the royal bloodline, no matter how far removed they were from the royal palace. Not even the infant children of the royal family were spared. So when Herod and the priests and pharisees who enjoyed a privileged livelihood under the protection of the King and the Roman army see an image of Elijah, what do you think came to mind for them?

Many who followed John and then turned to Jesus expected that kind of military and political coup to come. Next week we will hear again from John the Baptist as he waits in Herod's prison. John sent a messenger to ask Jesus, "Are you really the one, or is it to be someone else?" Given John's calculated claim on the spirit of Elijah, he probably expected Jesus to organize the masses into the kind of focussed energy that would topple Herod and drive the Romans out of Judea.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus reveals to John and to Pontius Pilate is not a kingdom of the earth, upheld by armies and extended by victories on the battle field and in the market place. Jesus preached of a kingdom that would not topple the powers of the earth, but one which would pester them with an idealistic reminder of their high calling, with communities of righteous people whose good deeds were not motivated by personal gain. The kingdom of Christ's vision was like mustard seeds and noxious weeds, like yeast polluting the unleavened flour, like lights shining in the darkness.

What Jesus sends back to answer John is not, most likely, what John expected to hear. Rather than a message suggesting that plans are being laid, that reconnaissance is being conducted, that weak points are being tested, Jesus sent back to John word that a deeper, divine level of healing has begun to take place: the blind see, the crippled are restored, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor are given good news.

The challenge of Christ's message, the part that got him crucified, the part that makes Christ's word mostly foolish and unacceptable to the majority of the world's population today, is that the few who seek a true and reliant union with God will prevail in ways that cannot always be measured in the standards of this world. In short, the troubling message of Christ is that the victories of his kingdom must be viewed through faith, not through concrete circumstances. The miracles, the spiritual consolations, the abiding joy that comes with trusting his message are reinforced by glimpses and by momentary flashes of divine encouragement.

The baptist seems to anticipate the second coming of Elijah, the toppler of thrones. His images are axes, winnowing forks and purging flames. Jesus is hardly timid and meek, but his arrival is not to topple Rome in a coup, but to topple Rome with nothing more than small gatherings of people committed to faithful living. By the grace of God this insignificant remnant would indeed change the world.

For in less than a hundred years the followers of Jesus had overturned many of the practices of female infanticide and the murder of women and girls the pagan world had practiced for centuries. In less than two hundred years the church had taught the world a new and humane way to care for the sick. In less than three hundred years the followers of Christ had expanded the practice of education in ways that no society had ever undertaken before. In less than four hundred years, a time sufficient for countless cycles of war and revolution in the history of the nations, the Roman empire had all but given way to a new authority, an authority which, albeit imperfectly, sought equity and justice for all. And by 1800 years after Christ his followers achieved the first culture recognition in over 10,000 years of human economic history that slavery is immoral.

For in the prophetic dream of the creation restored to a kingdom of God, the brood of vipers is a safe place for the child to rest a hand.