

Year B – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent      *“The beginning of Change”*

*“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1)*

So begins the great text that we call the Holy Bible. Holy – because in these words we discover the story of how our experience on this planet is saturated with life that exceeds the bounds of the material world – a life that we call sacred, divine, whole. It’s a life that we know about and long for in the deepest of our yearnings.

*“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ”. (Mark 1:1)*

Mark picks up the theme of a great movement that is about to happen, on a par with the first beginning as he opens his text with the Greek word “Arche”, which means “to begin”.

And it is John who ties them both together:

*“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)*

And so we stand at the precipice of great beginning. In the season of Advent we have the opportunity to start over again in our spiritual journey, to deepen our relationships with each other in Christ and with God who is Christ.

And Mark, the author of the Gospel that we will be reading this year, tells us that doing so is not simply a matter of making New Year’s resolutions. No, says Mark, this is a matter of heeding the warning of the Baptist – repent – change the direction of your life, join the movement of repentance that is sweeping across country.

As we watch and hear about the various “Occupy” groups across our country (regardless of your political opinion), we can almost get a sense of what swept across the land just prior to Jesus’ emergence on the scene. It was a dark time. People were struggling. The Roman rule was oppressive. Instead of rebellion and occupation, John the Baptist preached change. Can you imagine that today? We seem to look to others to change things for us while, at the same time, focusing on our own self interest.

Now, how many of us really want change? Change in some things, yes. Perhaps we agree with the “Occupy” movement, that the economic gap in this country needs to change, that more jobs are needed, that health care is too expensive, that . . . (you name your own desire)

And what about the Church? What in the church needs to change? Perhaps we would long for a return to former times when the Church was popular. But what about moving forward? Are we really ready to change? Do we want to be different?

I'm sure we all remember when Barack Obama came on the scene in 2007/8, preaching change that we could believe in. His very election indicated that a lot has changed already in this country, even as we struggle with the implications of that change. And, of course, no one person, no matter how powerful, can make change happen alone. And we have seen the effects of our leaders' inabilities to work together – a kind of stalemate that we don't really know how it will be resolved.

John the Baptist would say that if we're waiting for someone else to change things for us we should just go home and forget it. Change happens with each of us. It's not something we "believe in". It's something we engage in ourselves.

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, of the creation of the World, of the return to wholeness of the Word – the beginning starts in darkness and, for us, as humans, only continues with repentance – a willingness to see how we have failed to love God and our neighbor; a willingness to see that "one who is greater than John" is always trying to come to us, but we will not receive him. We are too busy doing our own lives.

Alfred Delp was a Jesuit priest, imprisoned by the Nazis who wrote a series of Advent meditations from his prison cell. They begin like this:

*"Advent is a time for rousing. Human beings are shaken to the very depths so that they may wake up to the truth of themselves. The primary condition of a fruitful and rewarding Advent is renunciation, surrender . . . A shattering awakening; that is the necessary preliminary. Life only **begins** when the whole framework is shaken."*<sup>1</sup>

Every Advent the question is the same: "What more do we need to let go of? How do we need to surrender to the Spirit of God that broods over us like a mother hen? How can we recognize that we are prisoners in a world of our own making?"

In the Church, our prison is made of our buildings which shape what we actually do; our "we've always done it that way before"; our inability to stretch beyond even our understanding of what Church is and what a community of faith can do; our fear of risk.

In our own lives, we become imprisoned by our "**have tos**": I am good mother/grandmother/wife, therefore, "I have to . . . ." Or how about those "**shoulds**"? We should do this or be this or that and so we do it. We attach our sense of who we are to our jobs, our things, our achievements, our successes. It's all a prison.

Today's scripture says that we can be free! In fact, God wants us to be free to laugh and love and change the world by our own freedom to do so.

We love those words from Isaiah, made famous in Handel's Messiah: "*Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. . . .*" These words, too, announce a new beginning that is still unfolding in creation. They announce a shepherd who will care for his flock and gently lead them. We understand that shepherd to be Jesus Christ.

What if we took this Advent seriously? What if we really looked at some new ways of being church together? What if we started with change in our lives that put our life in Christ first in our priorities? What if we actually believed John the Baptist, threw open our prison doors and walked out into the world?

What if we started the change we so long for with change in ourselves? That would be much more than change we could believe in, it would be change that happens, in the beginning . . . Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> From "*Celebrating Advent in A Prison Cell*" by Bill Kellermann in *Sojourners' Magazine*, November 1985, p. 30.