

The Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016
Year A, RCL

E. Bevan Stanley

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” These are the same words with which Jesus will begin his ministry as well. Today in this season of Advent, this is the word of God to us as well. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” What is this Kingdom of Heaven, or Kingdom of God? We can try out different words and synonyms. It is the realm of God, where God’s will is done. It is the commonwealth of God, in which all God’s creatures find their fulfillment and are rightly related to each other. In the first reading today Isaiah describes it in two ways. First he says of the one who is to come, the Messiah: “with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” The Kingdom will be place where the powerful use their power not to make the rich richer, or the powerful more powerful, but rather power will be used to provide justice especially for the poor and the oppressed. The little guy will not be run over by the powerful.

Isaiah also describes the Kingdom like this: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”

This is the vision that inspires such art as the famous painting *Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks. The idea that we could relate to all animals without danger or fear is an appealing one. There will be no eating of one another. No citizen of God's kingdom will harm another. This seems like a really fine idea.

The trouble is what it will cost. For these peaceable relationships are between creatures that are by nature enemies. The wolf lives by eating prey such as lambs. Lions live by devouring fatlings. For God's reign to come into being will require that those who prey on others stop, and that those who have been preyed upon learn to trust their erstwhile enemies.

Most of us have, at one time or another, been both victims and villains. We have harmed and been harmed. We have been members of groups that have harmed or been harmed. That issues of race are still a huge problem in this country is but one example. Similar problems surface in both interpersonal relationships and societal ones as well. How can we learn to trust those who have harmed us? How can I give up my instinct for self-preservation and my identity in order to make peace with some else?

"Repent," says John the Baptist. The word means to re-think. I need to change my thinking, the way I see the world, my assumptions about the way the universe is. If I am one of those who cause harm or have caused harm, intentional or not, I need to stop, make amends, and find new ways of behaving. If I see myself as a victim, I need to forgive, find ways to take control of some parts of my life, and find new ways of behaving.

This Kingdom of God, for which we pray every time we say the Lord's Prayer, does not and will not, simply descend upon us out of the sky. The Prophets offer it as a vision to which we can aspire. We are called to help build it. John the Baptist calls us to this work. Jesus calls us to this work and shows us how. The Holy Spirit empowers us to do it. Repentance is more than

simply rethinking, it means reorienting our lives, changing our values, and then acting in new ways as result of those changes.

This time of preparation for both the religious and secular celebrations of Christmas is a wonderful opportunity to practice some of the choices that will help bring the Kingdom of God to earth. We can be charitable to the poor. We can mend relationships among our families as we gather for the holidays. We can pray for those whom we fear or who have harmed us. We can make amends to those whom we have harmed. We can repair or improve our relationships with Jesus.

Sometimes this can be very frightening. We are setting out on new ventures for which we may not feel well prepared. We are asked to try trusting or believing when our experience has not given us much faith, perhaps has even taught us the cost of trust. Sometimes we are asked to let go of something that is very precious to us—a long held opinion, or a grudge, or some understanding of the way the world is or my place in it. Sometimes there is feeling, though, or memory that has particularly poisoned our lives that must be destroyed. Like Frodo in the Lord of the Rings, we may be called to say, “I will take the ring, though I do not know the way.” As it turns out, Frodo does not travel alone but has help along the way. So too we will find all sorts of surprising help as we try to rethink and change ourselves so that the Kingdom of God can come among us.

The African-American scholar, Cornell West contrasts the secular ways of power to this vision. “To be a Christian- a follower of Jesus Christ- is to love wisdom, love justice, and love freedom. This is the radical love in Christian freedom and the radical freedom in Christian love ... To be a Christian is to live dangerously, honestly, freely- to step in the name of love as if you may land on nothing, yet to keep stepping because the something that sustains you no empire can

give you and no empire can take away. This is the kind of vision and courage required to enable the renewal of prophetic, democratic Christian identity in the age of the American empire.”

Parker Palmer, the Quaker writer and lecturer, says, “Every movement begins with someone deciding to live divided no more.” One of those heroes who made the choice was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Every time I reread his “I have a Dream” speech, I am stirred to work for the building of a society that will be like the Kingdom of God. Another is Nelson Mandela, who, when his incredible life ended, left all the world a legacy and unfinished work to carry on.

Whether we are the wolf or the lamb, leopard or the kid, God calls us to make peace. Whether we are the powerful or the weak, God calls us to work for justice. We are invited to join in the adventure of building this kingdom, brick by brick, relationship by relationship, word by word, deed by deed, choice by choice. Whatever it takes. And we are led into this new community by the little child, who will come among us at last in a manger in Bethlehem.

Amen.