

“ARE YOU READY OR NOT?”

II Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

We know that the meaning of the word, advent, is coming. In the season of Advent, we focus on Jesus' first coming into the world and on the second advent or Jesus' second coming to the world. We cannot be content to dwell dreamily on the sentimentalities of Jesus' birth in a stable in Bethlehem. We are prodded by our scriptures to consider also the reality of the prophesied return of Jesus Christ to judge the world. St. Peter was concerned with this matter in his Second Epistle, and it is evident that there were those who doubted and scoffed at the idea of Jesus' return. Many of the earliest Christians expected the second coming to take place during their lifetimes, and when it did not come by the time of their deaths, many of the second generation of Christians were doubtful that it ever would. This is why Peter took great pains to point out that God's time is not like our time. For the Eternal One, who can see thousands of our years in one of his moments, there is always time to be patient and wait. However, Peter did affirm the reality of Jesus' return, and he supported the apostolic teaching that it will come like a thief, surprising many who will not be expecting it, and who have not made adequate preparations. You and I will do well to heed Peter's warning. Although the apocalyptic vision of the earth being consumed by fire is not a pleasant picture, it is quite possible in our nuclear age to imagine such a reality. Because Peter was so assured that the return of Jesus Christ would

take place, he exhorted his Christian readers to be ready, to be holy and righteous, so that they will be found prepared upon Christ's return.

Let us think through this message from St. Peter. What is our conception of God's role in human history? Do we really believe that God cares about humanity and this created world? We do if we take seriously the Advent theme that God sends his Son to be born into our world as a human person. If we have any faith that the message of Christmas is true, then we do believe that God cares about us. Surely we do not think that the God who loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to us 2000 years ago has quit loving us or calling us to follow his way. No! The coming of Jesus Christ teaches us that God does care about us and has a purpose for us. Therefore, we can be sure that God still cares and still plans for the fulfillment of his purposes in human life. We cannot be complacent; we cannot deny God's activity in our life. Even this year God is coming through Jesus Christ, and he will come finally. In this is our hope of salvation.

No more appropriate voice for Advent can be found than John the baptizer. He preached repentance and foretold the coming of Christ to his generation. Notice how Mark began his gospel account with John. It was John who prepared the people for Jesus. There were only two main points to the preaching of John the Baptist. He proclaimed first of all that the Messiah was at the door, and he insisted that repentance was necessary to receive him. In other words, John gave the people hope and told them how to enter into that hope. This preaching is still valid today and worthwhile to our hearing.

How have you and I responded to the good news of the coming of the Messiah and to the call to prepare for his arrival by repenting of our sins? Are we ready to receive Christ? Have we been truly repentant, and are we involved in disciplines and practices which enable us to be open to the baptism of the Holy Spirit which John promises that Jesus will bring and give to us? Our most important task today is to examine this message of John the baptizer and to consider our response to it.

John's preaching was powerful. He did not water it down at all. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins was his call. That was a hard message to hear for the people who had always trusted in their birthright to be God's chosen nation. Why, they were the ones who called other peoples to repent and believe in their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were their ancestors. Surely they were already righteous and did not need to repent. Such is our response today. Why, we are the good church folk. Repentance is not for us, we say. Peddle your message to the crooks, the drug pushers, the heathens overseas, and those folks who never darken the door of a church. Oh, we know that we are not perfect, but we excuse that by saying that nobody is. Sure we make mistakes, but do we really sin? That's such a strong word; couldn't you ease up a bit? No! John's call to repentance is aimed as much to you and to me as it was to the Jews of his own day. You and I need to face up to our sin. We are hardhearted. We are selfish. We are sometimes even mean and ugly toward others. When we are even a little bit honest with ourselves, we know that we are sinners who stand in need of

forgiveness. We understand that we are not pure and holy like God is, and we know that only the loving grace of God can purify us and help us to be holy. You and I need to hear the call to repentance very clearly this morning. The good news is that the Savior is coming, but if we have not repented of our sins, we will not be ready to receive him.

There is another aspect to our preparation for the coming of Christ. We must face up to the reality of whether or not we truly want to get close to the divine presence breaking into human history. Isn't it a bit safer to keep God at a distance? If we let Jesus get close to us, won't he make demands upon us? Won't he require us to change our lives?

John is the forerunner to Christ. He calls us to repentance so that we will be ready to receive all the grace that Jesus has to offer. Notice how John notes the great difference between himself and Jesus. John provides a water baptism for repentance, but he says that Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit. Here is the place that we so often fail in our Christian walk. We may go through repentance, or at least think that we do, while never going on to the next step, which is seeking all the goodness and grace that Christ has to offer to us. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is Jesus' gift to us of his very self. It is the way that he comes to dwell in our hearts and minds and spirits. It is this baptism which causes the transformation of our spirits into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Here is where the real crux of the matter is for me. Am I letting Jesus live in me? Am I seeking to be transformed by the power of the Holy

Spirit into the person that Jesus wants me to be? Am I willing to deny my selfish wants and desires for a greater good? I know that I am sorry for my sins, but am I sorry enough to want to change? If not, then I have not truly repented.

Look at your life today. Examine your priorities. Consider what you are doing to prepare for the celebration of Christmas. Are you spending time each day in prayer, asking God to come into your life and to lead you into a more perfect walk with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Are you experiencing the joy of this season, or suffering from party overload? Are you more interested in what you will get for a Christmas gift than you are in what you can give to someone in need? Yes, we all need to repent and to seek to be filled with the love and grace and power of the Holy Spirit, for ready or not, our Savior is coming. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.