

“A sense of urgency”

December 5, 2010

Text: *Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12*

I.

Life matters. Your lives matter. And therefore, what we do with these days of our lives matters. Why? Because God loves us so very deeply, to be sure. But also, because there's only so much time. In this sense, there is a **sense of urgency** to our lives.

In sports ... I'm thinking of football and basketball games ... with two or three minutes left in the game, the announcers are always reminding us: *plenty of time ...no need to panic.*

That may well be the case; but often times, it's not the case at all. Often times, the game is 99% lost and much of the reason is because the losing team didn't play with a sufficient **sense of urgency** soon enough in the game.

The point is: there are times in our lives when we ought to feel a **sense of urgency**.

With our economy, for example, and with certain business ventures. There are times when it's simply too late and the whole enterprise has gone south.

We also see this in our close relationships; for example, when a family needs to do an intervention for a loved one who is lost in some addiction. A **sense of urgency** here can make all the difference.

This is certainly the case with the issue of personal health, as well, where getting an annual check up and paying attention to diet and exercise are so important.

Life matters. Love matters. What we do or don't do today matters.

II.

William Muehl makes this point in a poignant story.

One December afternoon ... a group of parents stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session.

As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in his hands the *surprise*, the brightly wrapped package on which he had been working diligently for weeks.

One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents, all at the same time, suddenly slipped and fell. The *surprise* flew from his grasp, landed on the floor and

broke with an obvious ceramic crash. Ouch!

Understandably, the child began to cry inconsolably. His father, trying to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured,

Now, now, that's all right son. It doesn't matter. It's okay. It doesn't matter.

But the child's mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, *Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal.* And she wept with her son.

Stuff matters in life.

III.

Is there anything in our lives about which we feel a sense of urgency? A sense that we need to *make this moment, this day, this occasion or this opportunity—make it count?*

In the Church, we expect to hear from **John the Baptist** this time of year. But what I like about **John** is that he *gets it*. He gets it and he understands.

And that's why, every Advent season, he appears in the wilderness with a clarion call to all of us: *stand up ... be counted ... take measure of your lives*. We can't get to Christmas without, first, going through him.

John is the one about whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord ... make his paths straight.

As God's lead man for the Christ event breaking into the world, John the Baptist knows things aren't right and he knows we don't have forever. Advent is waiting, to be sure, but it is waiting with a purpose. It's not passive waiting; it's waiting that looks to the future.

We moderns in the Church don't much like the tone of judgment that John speaks of:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Judgment talk makes us uneasy. Fair enough; most of the time, it's too rough-edged and not very helpful.

IV.

On this note, a former New Testament Seminary Professor of mine—who also served as pastor in a number of congregations—said:

Every congregation I served as pastor has been populated in large measure by Christians recovering from Christian judgment.

1. Judgment due to poor and short-sighted interpretations of scripture that cast shadows on Christians who have gone through the pain of divorce ...
2. or Christians who are Gay or Lesbian ...
3. or seeking Christians who are trying to understand the Bible and for whom literal interpretations of the Bible seem unbending and harsh.

But while judgment talk may turn us off, the responsibility that judgment talk calls out of us is something we believe in. As Christians, we believe in being responsible people of faith. You can talk to us about responsibility:

- doing the right thing ... doing our fair share ...
- caring about one another and trying to be a good person.

It's in this sense that John gets our attention and won't let us cop out. Whatever language we use, John knows we all have **a sense of urgency** about stuff we need to be rid of (the Bible calls it *sin*); stuff in our spirit, stuff in our heart.

But we know it, and we long for something better.

We long to be a big enough person so we don't keep falling away from the spiritual high ground into pettiness and smallness; acting vindictive or jealous; never wanting to *give up* too much of our *ego* to be truly human; not wanting to admit what we *don't know* or what we're *not doing* that we should be doing.

Still, we know. But how can we be forgiven without a measure of vulnerability and a *repentant* heart?

V.

Out of the wilderness of our life-experience, friends, we come to Christmas once again—excited about special times of love and joy with family and friends; looking forward, perhaps, to some days of sweet relief from the rigors of work ... but mostly, the special moments with family. These are the moments we live for; they mean so much and make all the difference.

Out of our wilderness experience, we come to Christmas to somehow find our way to hope for a new day. Christmas *must* open our lives to hope, to the promises of the future and to an embracing of the future with new trust and new confidence.

ADVENT is the reassurance that a new day is about to be born. With **a sense of urgency** in his spirit, the prophet Isaiah speaks of such a day. It's a day when the spirit of the Lord will rest upon us ... and righteousness shall be the belt around our waist and faithfulness the belt around our loins.

*And the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ...
And the calf and the lion and the fatling together ... and a little child shall lead them.*

O what a day!

When the cow and bear shall graze and their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

And the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

And they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

O what a day!

And the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord ...

Come, Christmas come! We're waiting and we'll be ready!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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