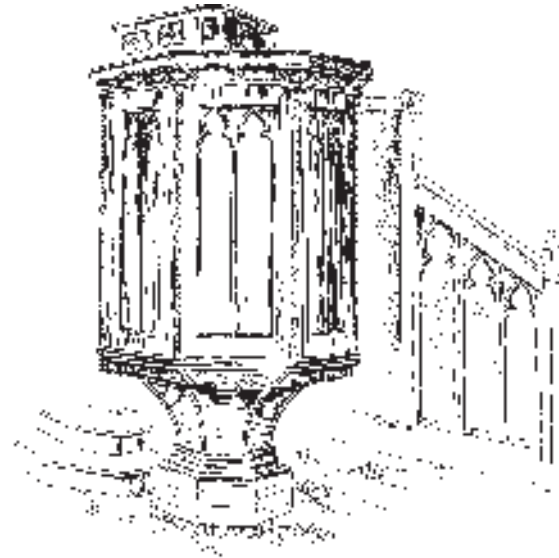


November 29, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Getting Ready For God

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 1:5-19

Our scripture for today, the first Sunday of Advent, comes from the beginning of Luke. Here, the angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah in the temple to announce the conception and birth of his son, John. This boy "will be filled with the Holy Spirit... He will herald God's arrival in the style and strength of Elijah ... he'll get the people ready for God." A people prepared – ready for God – that's John the Baptist's mission. And... that's what Advent is about, too – getting ready for God.

Yes, the Advent message is about being a people prepared for the coming of the Lord. In 2009, in a world which is largely given over either to terrorism and repressive brutality or to self-indulgent pleasures, John the Baptist and Advent are here to show us where we are to stand. Advent is out of phase with our culture. It encroaches uncomfortably upon us, making us wait (even wait to sing our favorite Christmas carols), and making us feel some degree of dissonance, with its stubborn resistance to the usual round of shopping and wrapping and baking and partying. I have never seen a picture of John the Baptist on any Advent calendar, yet he is the foremost figure of Advent.

All four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, agree: there is no good news, no gospel of Jesus Christ without John the Baptist. John's whole life was lived with but one purpose; he was born a man of destiny, to declare the imminent arrival of the coming Messiah. He was born to get a people prepared.

John's divinely ordained location in the world is to stand on the frontier of the ages as God begins to

turn the world away from its past of sin and bondage into a future of promise and freedom. John's function is to proclaim the coming reversal of the downward spiral of human history, to deliver the message of the arriving Son of God. The wickedness of this world is truly doomed. The Lord of the universe is about to step on the stage of world history to reverse its course. The next person to appear will be God.

Will we be ready? Let's reflect for a moment on our position. What does it mean to be a people prepared? Where are you and I located on that frontier where John stood? Where do we stand on the great divide between this age of terrorism, disease and death, and God's coming kingdom of truth, liberty, and life?

Being a people prepared means understanding that the Christian life means participating in the struggle where the forces of evil are confronted by the power of God. The New Testament repeatedly describes the Christian life as a battle. Life is full of tension – the tension between the values of this world and those of the world to come. This warfare is conducted on many fronts. For instance, I think of a businessperson who refuses to go along with corrupt company policies even though it would benefit him financially. He is holding his position on the Advent frontier. I think of a woman I spoke to a few weeks ago who has renounced the opportunity to run off with a new man and instead has recommitted herself to her marriage. I think of social workers and teachers who remain faithful to their vocations despite inadequate compensation; parents who insist on limits even when it makes their children intensely angry; and writers, accountants, builders, cooks who stand for excellence in an age of declining standards – these are Advent people, holding their positions in spite of personal losses.

Each of us here today individually, and all of us here today collectively, are given opportunities every day to reconsider what it means to be a people prepared for the coming of the Lord. Who is getting ready for Christmas?

The other day on the news, I saw a woman being interviewed as she was standing in the aisles of F.A.O. Schwarz in New York City. She said, "We're not cutting back this year after all. We're going to spend about \$500 more this year." Is that the way to get ready for Christmas? I can think of some couples I know who this very week will sit down together to plan year-end gifts they will send to religious and social service agencies. Who is getting ready for Christmas, the woman in the store with her budget for luxuries, or the couples with their lists of charities? To all of us John says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8).

Friends, as we get ready for our worldly Christmas, let us at the same time observe Advent. Let us make room in our hearts for that strange, lonely sentinel on the frontier of the ages, still pointing away from himself to the One Who Is To Come, identifying for us the place we are to stand.

Whenever we do the right thing in spite of its cost, we are doing what Christian soldiers do; we are standing firm on the battlefield between the powers of this world and the powers of the Age to Come, one foot in the territory of the enemy, and the other, the decisive foot, firmly planted in the kingdom of God. What is your piece of the territory? It may be a small one, but it is the one God has given you to hold, and it will be part of God's new world in the Great Liberation.

Let the news go forth: God is on the move. God is creating a new humanity. You and I belong to it. Let us honor God by holding on to our piece of the territory, rejoicing to be a people prepared, until he comes again.