

Second Sunday of Advent — Year C  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
December 9, 2018

I accidentally attended a high school reunion several years ago. I had no intention of going back to it, but, coincidentally, I was visiting my parents that weekend, and the reunion was literally a mile from their house. It seemed peevish not to go, so I borrowed a car and went down to the Lion's Club recreation hall to see what the ravages of time had done to all of us.

Someone had thoughtfully put a sign out front welcoming back all of us Mustangs. There was crepe paper in black and blue, our school colors, all over the ceiling, and the rectangle folding tables were all set up in a square, making room for, what I had to assume was the saddest dance floor in America. I steeled myself to be miserable.

I was surprised at what a nice time I had. People whose faces I remembered but who I had not thought about for years sat at tables talking about life: kids, jobs, aging parents, joys, and hardships. We remembered a few people who had died. I saw my best friend from high school and learned that he was a teacher and a dad. He had married his high school sweetheart. I ended up talking to a firefighter for a while, and we discovered that we had actually known one another since the fifth grade. Before you knew it, we were buying each other beers, which I don't typically drink, and toasting to the good health of the magnificent class of 1996.

I know that the Lord's Table is the most important one, but I've been convinced over the years that there are more holy tables out there in the world than we first thought. The prophets never come into churches and temples; they always start out in the unlikely places, in the wilderness, in the small town, at the Lion's Club, to begin their ministry of imagining what a Godly world could look like.

John the Baptist is the hero of our Gospel story this morning, though you could just as easily call him John the Prophet. He comes on the scene after having been formed by the wilderness into a holy man with a special vision. You remember that in Luke's story, John is the elder cousin of Jesus — born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were said to be too old to have children. John's role in the story is different than Jesus'. He's not here to be the Saviour; rather he is here to be a prophet like the great prophets of the Old Testament — always pointing toward a time when the reign of God will arrive and this crooked old world will be made straight.

John travels the countryside quoting the prophet Isaiah:

Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'

Somehow on this reading, I was struck on the phrase, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” It’s quite a poetic way of saying “everybody.” Everybody shall see the salvation of God. How can that possibly be true? There seems to be too much wickedness in the world for this beautiful vision to come to pass.

Last week I talked a bit about the Christian obligation to see a neighbor in everyone we meet. And this week, that same obligation is being put a different way. It’s not just that we all see each other as neighbors; it’s that we will all see God’s salvation. Over and over, the scriptures show us our responsibilities horizontally toward one another and vertically toward God.

It seems impossible that there will be a day when the whole world will be filled with the love of the neighbor and the love of God. We’re too different. The skeptic in me thinks there isn’t a Lion’s Club recreation hall large enough for us all to fit in, and there isn’t enough beer in the world to bring about that kind of goodwill.

But that’s what John is preaching. He preaches that the coming of Jesus in the world makes the vision of a shared table around the world possible. Jesus, whose birth we so anxiously await during the season of Advent, gives us a taste of the redeemed world that the prophets imagine.

Our audacity as Christians is to believe what John is preaching and live as if it is possible, the sometimes overwhelming evidence to the contrary. We actually believe that Christ being in the world makes possible a different kind of relationship between people and with God. We actually believe that war, and greed, and oppression are not the winners in the human story. That’s gutsy to believe, but we do it anyway.

Christians are people of paradox: we live with our eyes fully open to the injustice of the world, and we also cling to the vision of the prophets — the straight paths and all flesh being awakened to the salvation of God. It’s almost like we are dual citizens, having passports for the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God.

I invite you this morning to wrap yourself in John’s vision of a Godly world. I invite you this morning to be surprised by all the ways in this world that God is calling all sorts of different people together into a new kind of relationship with one another. Maybe it’s harder to see through the distortions of the world. But John wants to slice through all that and show us what is possible. Let yourself be surprised be how wonderful it can be to really love your neighbor — even if it’s a firefighter you have nothing in common with drinking beer in a Lion’s Club. John’s vision is for him. For you. For me. And for the world. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen.