

2nd Sunday of Advent

Ebenezer Scrooge and John the Baptist are not far removed from each other. Scrooge is perhaps the most celebrated seasonal figure undergoing a change of heart. His visits with spirits of the past, present and future gradually convince him that his loathing for Christmas, based on its fiscal intrusions, is costing him a love for Christmas with its inspirational goodwill. Scrooge discovers that true happiness comes not from material wealth but from the wealth of human relationships. He repents, which makes him a fictional example of the right response to the message of a historical figure, John the Baptist.

History is where Saint Luke situates John the Baptist. Luke names John's contemporary local religious leaders, the regional tetrarchs, and two individuals who would play important roles at the end of Jesus' life: Pontius Pilate and Herod. In fact, during Luke's account of the Passion, Pilate and Herod become lifelong friends after deciding Jesus' fate. Luke also mentions Tiberius Caesar, the emperor ruling over all. The fifteenth year of his reign puts the appearance of John the Baptist about the year 29 AD, the year that Tiberius lost his mother Livia. Luke ranked John the Baptist not among ordinary people, but within the list of the civil and spiritual rulers of history. John is no character from a novel. He really lived. His religious message pricks a society distracted by civil concerns. No matter who you are or when you live, John the Baptist matters.

John made an impact because, as Luke says, "the word of God came to [him] in the desert." John carried a message, but he merely provided the voice. The word was God's. What did John proclaim? Luke states it succinctly: "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Every year the gospels on the second and third Sundays of Advent tell about John the Baptist. His miraculous birth foreshadowed the birth of Jesus. The command to repent issued first from his lips, but also from the lips of Jesus. John's martyrdom prophesied Jesus' Passion. Luke's solemn introduction of John parallels that of many Old Testament prophets. John, the greatest of all the prophets, spans the two Testaments, preparing us to hear the complete message of God's incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.

The Church does not promote penitential practices during Advent as strongly as it does in Lent. Even so, many people, in the weeks before Christmas, use this time for self-scrutiny. They ask at the end of a semester, "Have I dutifully applied myself to studies?" They ask when they shop, "Do my purchases express my values?" They ask on their way to family gatherings, "Have I properly set my heart to love the people I am about to see?" Christmas creates occasions for love and selflessness as it recalls the selfless love of the Word made flesh.

In the midst of this penitential mood, we hear John's pointed message today: Repent. Be forgiven. Prepare the way of the Lord. Ebenezer Scrooge is but one example of a fictional character who took to heart the message of repentance. Each of us, living within our place in history, amid the religious and civil rulers of our day, hears the same admonition. John the Baptist calls on us to repent our misbehavior at school, at work and at home. That will prepare the way for the coming of Christ.

Sunday, December 9, 2018