

December 9, 2012

The Second Sunday in Advent

Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Prepare the Way of the Lord

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight

John the Baptist came from a community that had separated itself from the world, engaged in ritual baptisms and waited for a mighty act of God. For whatever reason, he left that community to share with everyone the message that had been laid upon his heart: "Prepare the way of the Lord." His vision was of land being flattened, hills laid low and valleys raised up so that the journey home from exile, the journey home from wilderness and the journey home from sin will be safe, fast, immediate, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." How does he want the people to make their preparation? He wants them to do what we strive to do every week. He wants them to repent. The word 'repentance' means 'turning'. He wants us to turn our lives or orient ourselves toward what really matters, such that we can live more courageously, more faithfully, more generously, more freely, more openly and more lovingly than in the past. It is not so much a message that says 'repent and wait for God to act.' It is more a message that in repenting, in reorienting your life you will see the salvation of God. You will see the salvation of God *in the act of turning*.

Some of you will have seen a wonderful film called "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel". It has a marvelous cast including Judi Dench, Maggie Smith and Bill Nighy who play characters who have moved to a retirement hotel in India. The manager of the hotel is a young man called 'Sonny', played by Dev Patel (who was also in 'Slumdog Millionaire'). One of his catch phrases is "Everything will be alright in the end. If it is not alright, then it is not yet the end!" St. Paul acknowledges that the great act of God for which we are preparing to celebrate in the birth of Jesus is by no means the end. "*I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*" We know that after Christmas Day, life will continue to hold both joys and sorrows as we navigate the inevitable challenges that life brings. So this business of preparation is not preparation for some steady state, for death, or for the end of change. It is preparation for newness of life, fullness of life and abundance of life.

In the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, the pensioners have to decide how to address new circumstances. Their life is by no means over. Some embrace their brave new world, finding adventure and new sense of self. Others resist, sticking to their prejudices, believing that everything they left behind in England was real life and this Indian business was just an awful interlude. Some find happiness; others have much more work to do addressing and overcoming or failing to overcome their deep resentments about the hand that they have been dealt in life. The ones for whom retirement was a picture of financial security or a picture of being surrounded by loving family or any pictured set of

expectations as to how life was going to be, had to let go of those very pictures before they could enjoy life. They had to re-orient themselves and not all of them found it easy and not all of them succeeded.

In just one example, Muriel Donnelly, played by the incomparable Maggie Smith, is someone who has been “in service”--a housekeeper for a grand family for her entire adult life. After training the person who turned out to be her replacement she was deemed ‘surplus to requirements’ and let go. When we meet her, she is bitter and racist and in painful need of a hip replacement. Rather than waiting for six months or more on the National Health, she elects to be ‘outsourced’ to India for a quicker, cheaper surgery. She prepares for the trip by filling her carry-on luggage with particularly English products: Hobnob Biscuits, various kinds of pickled onions and so on, most of which are confiscated by security at the airport as containing liquids but she is left with her precious biscuits or cookies. She overcomes her revulsion at being treated by an Indian surgeon, but sits in the hotel day after day, sometimes making suggestions to one of the untouchables who does the cleaning. In time she is invited to this woman’s home and understands that it would give enormous offense if she did not taste the proffered food. In the end she gives the woman a packet of her secret stash of English biscuits, starts looking at the accounts of the failing hotel and in effect becomes the manager who helps Sonny realize his vision for the place over the disbelief and objection of his, (Sonny’s,) interfering and dominating mother. Muriel Donnelly was happy in a way she had probably never been before. She was truly needed, able to use her skills, not being used and soaking up community among friends rather than soaking up racism and snobbery.

Muriel Donnelly had made all kinds of preparations for her passage to India, only to find that they were quite the wrong kind of preparations. She lost her onions and the biscuits were only truly valuable when she gave them away.

Life insurance, retirement planning, making a will, investing for the future and so on are all perfectly fine things to do. But they are not the kind of preparation that helps in the face of Bernie Madoff, recession or fiscal cliffs. One of the couples in the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel were there because they had invested their life savings in their daughter’s internet business which was not going well and rather than getting rich, they found that the kind of life they could afford in England did not suit them--hence their move to India. One of them embraced the experience, visiting temples, making new friends, getting on with life, while his wife lived and longed for the day when she could go home. She was miserably unprepared and quite unwilling to let go of her picture of what her life was supposed to be like.

If what we do here is about placating an angry deity or preparing for some kind of steady state whatever our picture of heaven, then we are likely to find what life actually brings to be a disappointment and challenge. Preparing the way of the Lord is what we do each week when we turn again to ward what really matters allowing that to shape our lives. It includes letting go of sins and other burdens, offering ourselves and opening ourselves to God’s transforming grace, practicing generosity and deepening the gratitude in our hearts for life.

As St. Paul writes from his prison cell: *And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best...* Let us now respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer. Repent. Prepare the way of the Lord. And see the salvation of God. Let us pray...