

December 5, 2010

**The Second Sunday in Advent**

Matthew 3:1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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**Forgive Us Our Sins**

This is the second week of an Advent series of reflections on The Lord's Prayer. Last week we thought about the prayer as focused on the fulfillment of the Kingdom or Reign or Rulership of God. Jesus is looking to the future and the fullness of the presence of God in just about every phrase and petition of his prayer. We also talked about how God is God and we are not, for God is hallowed and other, distant as one in heaven and intimate as a parent.

Today we hear John the Baptist trumpeting his call for repentance "for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus teaches us too to ask that the kingdom be made present in our lives and not long after, that we beg forgiveness for our sins. *Thy Kingdom come*, and not long after that: *Forgive us our sins, our trespasses*.

Repentance, as we have observed many times, means 'turning'. Repentance is the turning of our lives, and especially our turning toward what really matters in life, and the consequent rearrangement of our priorities. This means that full fledged repentance is not something we do very often. We already organize our lives around things that matter to us, sometimes for good and sometimes not so much. One sign of a problem or an addiction is when we find ourselves thinking about and making possible what in the old days we called 'occasions for sin,' imagining that we won't really enjoy a party where alcohol is not served, or making sure there is time to get high before we go out. We can and do organize our lives around making an income, around exercise, around sleep and the like. But what really turns our heads, as it were, is love.

Before Alexander, now nineteen, was born, I so well remember wondering how anyone managed to have and raise a child. How do you keep doing what you need to do and still care for and fund a child? The answer, of course, as most of us know is that you don't keep doing what you were doing and simply add a child to the mix. The baby changes everything and the economy of the household shifts or turns in a new direction with a new perspective.

One of the most common conversations between couples preparing for marriage is about friends. How will they maintain their friendships and their patterns of life once they marry? What they discover is that their new and publicly made commitments change their priorities and that over time, their patterns of relationship with their friends, especially their single friends, will inevitably change.

How much more true it is that everything changes when we recognize that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near. John the Baptist's call to repentance is a call to turn again toward what really matters and what is really life-giving. That turning means new or renewed perspective. We see things in a different light and we see ourselves in a new or renewed light. Pretty quickly once we turn anew to what really matters we recognize how often we have organized our lives around things that don't matter. We see how often we have, usually without knowing it, sought to play God. We turn, and in the turning, recognize how distorted has been our own view of ourselves and of others. Those distorted views pervert our relationships, that perversion being the beginning of brokenness. When we have distorted views of our selves and others we get into all kinds of trouble.

Some of you will have read Ken Follett's latest book<sup>1</sup> and the first in what he calls "the Century Trilogy." It is called *Fall of Giants* and is really a novel of the First World War. One of the things that comes through in this book as it does in more formal histories<sup>2</sup> is the sense that many of those in power, royalty and aristocracy see themselves as properly over their people, almost by divine right as it were. European nations jockey for who is the best or most important or most powerful. And so we have aristocracy over the populace at large European nations seeing themselves as better than other European nations and certainly better than Arabs or 'colonials' and, of course we have, the English of any class over every foreigner of any variety.

War, class struggle, women and blacks as second class citizens, the rise of Bolshevism — all these dreadful realities and the degradation and death they brought about for millions, were in part a consequence of the distorted views of reality held by those in power in their day. It does not take a huge leap of imagination to see modern day philosophies of 'nation building' held by people of every political stripe as a good thing, but perhaps dependent on similarly distorted views as to what is right and good and truly important.

These distorted view of ourselves—whether we think we are wonderful and blessed beyond measure or think we are somehow unworthy frauds just waiting to be unmasked and shown for what we are—these distortions are all sin. When we become aware of the kingdom of heaven drawing near, repentance is the proper response and soon we will be asking forgiveness for our sins, for the damage we have done in our brokenness. Failure to recognize the proximity of the kingdom of heaven will lead to the kind of degradation that will seem as though we are chaff in unquenchable fire rather than life-giving wheat in the granary.

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Follett, *Fall of Giants* (Dutton, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (Holt, 1989) and John Keegan, *The First World War* (Knopf, 1999)

We can't tell what is distorted until we get a new view and a renewed perspective. If you have ever had the experience of participating in our worship for years and then suddenly hearing a phrase or a prayer or the words of a hymn in a new and fresh way, then you know something of what it means to be given new perspective.

*Thy kingdom come and Forgive us our sins* we pray as our Lord has taught us. Grant us the new vision that comes from repentance as we know the drawing near of your kingdom. In part this is also a response to the prophet John who proclaims: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

As ever we take a time of silence to respond to the gospel. Let us pray...