

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Martha Sterne
Advent 2
4 December, 2016



Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ.

When I was fourteen a fierce but almost totally silent battle was going on in my mother's family – because that's the way that family battles. My aunt Muff and uncle Kenneth and a painter friend had bet each other as to who could finish first a publishable short story – they lived in Greenville, Mississippi and their buddies included Walker Percy, Hodding Carter, Shelby Foote and that's what those people did for kicks, they wrote things. Muff won – got her story published in the New Yorker, and that was all very fine – no problems – though in that short story was a terrifying image of a water skier on a Mississippi lake who skis over a ball of roiling water moccasins and is bit to death and that became a phobia for me. For words matter and words can make you see monsters. And I couldn't unsee them.

Anyway back to the fierce but almost totally silent battle – all the great aunts and uncles and little old lady cousins – which I have now become a little old lady cousin and I like it - anyway they were all proud of Muff about the New Yorker story but then a few months go by and it turns out Muff had also put some family tales and character sketches together and showed a friend and he showed it to a fancy New York publishing house and they called her and said would you put this in our best first novel of the year contest? And she said to herself O God, it's got all those aunts and uncles and little old lady cousins in it. And she declined. And then the fancy New York publisher said, well, I'm just telling you. If you put this manuscript in, you have won. And so she did. And, I would have, too. But then between Muff and her two unwilling central character aunts and and to a certain extent her parents, my grandparents, there came a lifelong wariness, a chasm. For words have costs. O she used a pen name but – in Mississippi and Louisiana in those days, or anywhere on earth these days, what good does that do? Words matter and they travel at the speed of light and words create and destroy and her really good first book did both. Please wrap your head around the complexity of that.

Today we have two prophets of the Word, The one I love, Isaiah, does the most important religious work I believe there is – he gives hurting, baffled people the words to imagine the world differently, to imagine the reign of God always and ultimately coming – where there is no hatred, no chasm, no predator but all connection, – like those crazy cross-species videos that entrance us – the snake and the hamster, the elephant and the duck, the monkey and the pig. Isaiah sees God's day coming when the wolf shall live with the lamb, the cow and the bear graze and their young nap together and a little child shall even put her hand – horrible idea - her hand on the snakes' den and not get hurt.

And

*Nobody will hurt or destroy
on all God's holy mountain.
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

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Isaiah saw this almost 500 years before Jesus was born and saw him coming and a peoples following - with the Spirit of the Lord resting on them, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, with deeper judgment than just what she sees or just what he hears, who treat the poor fairly, with equity, a fierce and loving people clothed in righteousness and faithfulness. For Isaiah saw that people do become like their leader. As an aside, I really wonder if we must keep thinking that THE leader will show up in the democratic or republican party? For here's the thing - the leader that is always coming is not coming to do our political agendas and tasks outside of us. The One who is always coming is coming to rule inside us - our hearts, our souls, our very beings so that WE - WE become people with agency, who act and speak into the events and troubles of the day and thus co-create with God a new world.

Can you imagine such a world of justice, compassion, peace? If you can, then speak toward that world and let those around you hear from you. Your words matter so much. Are you willing to act toward such a world? Are you willing to stop repenting the sins of other people - whomever you disagree with - and start focusing on your own insides. Your own actions and words? Your own lived life? You, yourself and Christ your Leader in you living hope?

For, as Howard Zinn says, *to be hopeful is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something, If we remember those times and places - and there are so many - where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. For the future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is in itself a marvelous victory.*

Tuesday, I went down to the Capitol to hear a conversation hosted by Mary Margaret Oliver and assisted ably by her very attractive, if you like older men, chief of staff, the one to whom I am married. It was about banning assault weapons and the head of trauma medicine for Morehouse Medical School, Dr. Omar Danner, gave me my word for Advent to give to you. He said when he was in training at Johns Hopkins, his teacher said to him where do you begin when you see a shot up person arriving in the ER? And Dr. Danner said, well I check his vital signs. And his teacher said, No. You check Your vital signs. So I'm passing that on. You check your own vital signs.

And here is where the other prophet John the Baptist comes in - he doesn't start with a grand, poetic vision like Isaiah's. He starts by looking at the here and now and at us, at religious folk with power and resources - and he calls us a brood of vipers which I deeply resent but there you are. And he says Rethink this life thing, this faith thing, which is literally Re-Pent. Re-Again pent-think. Get it together. Check your vital signs. And then speak and listen and yes, do engage politically, protest and compromise, help, reach out and out. Just speak your word from a centered self.

Words matter. What is your Advent Word? How will you speak it? How will you live it hopefully?