

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Luke 3:7–18

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**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

While I was driving on the interstate this week one of my children noticed a bumper sticker, which read: 'My driving scares me too'. It was a wonderful use of humor on I-85, a place I find is so humorless, most of the time. What felt different about this bumper sticker was both the confessional and the invitational aspect to it: 'tell me the things that scares you most and I will tell you mine'.

It's easy to miss with all of the hubbub leading up to Christmas, but Advent is a penitential season. A time for us to name what scares us, about ourselves, perhaps. Different to the Lenten forty days of penitence where we are invited to go with Jesus into the wilderness, Advent is the time of preparation we observe by ourselves in order to receive the Christ-child in the first place. A time for us to prepare room for the birth of God.

I wonder, is there anything that 'scares you too' about your own motoring through life that you'd like to deal with this side of the manger? Anything that scares you about the world?

I'm scared of what the end point might be for the apparently endless push towards sectarianism that seems to characterize the age we live in. From the local desire to break up Atlanta into even smaller enclaves of separateness than we already live with, to what is happening in India today, a country I love, not least for its extraordinary capacity for co-existence, where legislation is codifying the dismantling of the world's largest democracy by making Hindu citizens normative in a country of nearly 400 million non-Hindus. Where does our desire to be separate from others end? What kind of common life do the actions that effectively say, 'I have no part in you' leave us with?

As much as the world's insatiable hunger for a certain splendid isolation makes me fearful for our future, it is what I see in the mirror that I believe John the Baptist would have been most interested in. Yet this is often the rub. The 21 years I've now been preaching in Episcopal or Church of England churches have taught me that our part of the Christian tradition is often quite comfortable naming the world's shortcomings. We are far less fluent in naming our own, which is important, because the axe in Luke's gospel that lies at the root of the tree is not the means for deconstructing the sins of the world. The axe is for us.

Share with others. Don't take too much for yourself. Be just. These are the answers John offers to the crowds, the soldiers and the tax collectors who have come to the banks of the Jordan looking for a new start. Perhaps the future of their ancient world also scared them. Where does the absolute power of Rome end? Of course, we see the answer to that question later on in the Christian story in the form of the cross. Yet the implication is not that we pick up the axe and start swinging,

hoping to fashion the world more to our liking, for it is not us but Christ, the One who sees us for who we truly are, who will wield the power to refine us into becoming the person God intends for us to be.

So there it is, the inconvenient truth about Advent: we have to deal with ourselves. I'll admit, the Christian life would be far more palatable if we didn't have to look in the mirror. It's hard to admit you have work to do, I know - just ask my wife. I would be a truly humble person, if it wasn't for the fact that I am always right. I would be a champion for those whose lives face incalculable hardship in this world, if it wasn't for the fact that I rather like the comforts I enjoy. I would be saintly in my generosity, if I didn't feel the urge to store up treasure for a future that perpetually looks more uncertain than the past.

The good news, though, for me and for you is that the axe that lies at the roots of the tree is not intended to cut us down but to be strong enough to clear away the brush and wild weeds that we let grow around our hearts and that make us so ungenerous and self-satisfied. For the refining presence of God's love extended to us over and over again is powerful enough to peel away the layers of hubris such that eventually we get to glimpse that glorious person we have been all along. The mature Christian life not only recognizes this truth - that we have to look in the mirror if we are to hope for a better world - it finds it to be the ever-present reality of the journey of faith. So where do we make a start?

One way that I have found helpful for me to start to get over my sense of self-importance and actually lift the lid on who I really am, is to pay attention to where I am planting my feet. As theologian Gustavo Gutierrez wrote, 'To be converted [to our neighbor] is to know and experience the fact that, contrary to the laws of physics, we can stand straight, according to the gospel, only when our center of gravity is outside ourselves'. Advent is a season designed to help us walk a little straighter because inherent in this time of preparation is the invitation to place our feet in the world oriented to others more than ourselves. After all, the manger only has room for one body, and it isn't ours.

My own experience in life of placing my center of gravity outside of myself has been that I have needed the help of community. I learned that lesson powerfully at the tender age of 18 when I was pretty sure that the universe did, in fact, revolve around my hopes and concerns. I was a college freshman, and had signed up, with rather scant attention paid to the details, to volunteer at a homeless shelter called 'The Bridge'. It offered temporary housing, a square meal, and support in accessing local services to unhoused people aged 16-20 in the Oxford area. Each night, volunteers would sit and chat with folks over a mug of tea, help make dinner, and then sleep in the dorm.

Now, I had grown up sharing a room with my older brother most of my childhood, so I was used to the occasional tennis shoe being thrown my way in the wee hours of the night. I was also all too accustomed to the unique fragrance teenage boys manage to create in their bedrooms. Moreover, I had only recently spent six months living in India where I had slept outdoors with scores of teenagers on treks and camping trips. But this felt different. These young men were from the streets. They were tough, had leathery, weathered skin and knew how to navigate themselves in and out of trouble. I, on the other hand, was a wet-behind-the-ears student at a university famous for inflating the egos of its to-be graduates. Spending the night was not exactly what I had imagined when I'd signed up in Fresher's week.

I'd like to think that God had nudged me into putting my name down on that sign-up sheet because God knew that I needed it, yet I doubt that the Lord of all creation is actually that kind of personal event planner. That God taught me about myself through that experience, though, was indubitable. The closeness of it all, literally where I placed my body well beyond my comfort zone, created an opening for small conversations of tenderness that allowed me to see myself anew, and how very similar these young men were to me. I could so easily have been one of them.

It was a realization that changed me. For the years that followed, similar such experiences of placing my body outside of my own self-centeredness have been what has formed me in my life in Christ perhaps more than anything else. They have been the openings that have enabled me to say with vulnerable honesty, 'my driving scares me too'.

I wonder if I might invite you to walk down a similar path. You may have heard over the past few weeks about our new partnership in Peoplestown. It is about a lot of things. It's about the education of young children, so often interrupted by poverty and the chronic underfunding of schools. It's about helping neighbors face the multiple challenges of life in a neighborhood perhaps just a short distance from the ones you and I live in, yet on many levels a world away. It's about the desire we have in this place to do more than learn and talk about the injustices and pains of this city, but do something about them. And, it is also about where we plant our feet; where we place our bodies as followers of the Christ-child who placed God's body in the world for all our sakes.

It has been heartening to see so many of you already respond to the call to place your bodies in Peoplestown and come alongside young children as tutors, so much so that Emmaus House had to ask the school if they could accommodate more of us than originally planned. Others are stepping forward to serve on one of the 'Bridge of Hope' teams, working in groups to help families in Peoplestown build better lives for themselves, offering to them the most important gift any of us have to offer: ourselves. If you can see yourself doing that work, please let me know.

Christ calls us to be bridges of hope. May this Advent draw you deeper into that promise, inspiring you to place your body just that bit closer to your neighbor such that something new of the light of Christ might break in. The world does not need us to be right or righteous about what might scare you or I about it. It just needs us to be present. Open. Willing to be honest to the God who will slowly make of us, all God needs to renew the world. Be a bridge, and - to quote my favorite Advent theologian, Leonard Cohen - let the light get in, 'ring the bells that still can ring, Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in'.