

Advent: An Invitation to Adventure – Brian Hartley

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

One of the first great experiences I can remember as a child is going to Disneyland. Since my two favorite television programs growing up were “The Mickey Mouse Club” and “Davy Crockett,” a visit to Disneyland meant an opportunity to embrace a world I only knew through our rather small black-and-white picture tube. In those days, this place was newly-minted and spic-and-span from top to bottom, while within the park, there were a variety of rides and shows grouped around different themes. One of my favorites was known simply as “Adventureland,” a place inhabited by dense vegetation, ominous animal noises, and surprising creatures, like elephants and crocodiles, that might rise up unexpectedly out of the waters around your boat causing women to scream and young children to wet their pants. The fact was that visiting Adventureland always brought with it a conflicting mix of emotions that oscillated between excitement and fear.

That same stew of feelings marks our own dwelling at this point in the season of Advent. After all, these two words—“advent” and “adventure”—come from the same root. As one of my favorite English authors, Ronald Blythe, says in his little book of reflections on the church year, “Advent is a thrilling season and a solemn season. . . To set out on an adventure is both exciting and risky. Unsafe. Adventure means a hazardous enterprise,” (*The Circling Year*, 2). It is to this “hazardous enterprise” that we are called on this third Sunday of Advent and I would like to suggest that this morning’s texts invite us to live in this very tension as we find ourselves surrounded by words and images of judgment, on the one hand, and of rejoicing, on the other. And, for just a few moments I’d like for us to consider what it means to engage wholeheartedly this sense of adventure in the hopes that our journey together might provide for us ways of becoming more like Christ.

Every adventure requires us to begin somewhere and usually it is with a strong voice of command that catches us up short and invites us onto the road. Good authors know this and have a way of drawing us in from the very first page. One of my favorite examples of this is the Old English word, “Hwaet!” which marks the beginning of 3,182 lines of alliterative speech broken up into two half-lines each divided by a caesura, or breath mark, with two principal stresses in each half-line. The poem is known simply as *Beowulf* and as a young college student whose head was filled with visions of swords and bucklers, monsters and mead halls, I couldn’t get enough of it. The language was dense and earthy, yet musical and alive. It conjured up other worlds and other times, transporting me to places of exciting adventure.

In our own Advent adventure, John the Baptist plays this role of providing a commanding voice that summons us to listen. He is the last of the great Old Testament prophets whose very

description reminds us of the eccentricities of these men of God who walked naked in the streets and dared kings to strike them dead. As I am wont to quote from Frederick Buechner, “the prophets were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness no one was ever comfortable,” (Wishful Thinking, 74-75). And no prophet was more tipsy than John the B. He ranted, he railed, he called down fire on all those within listening distance. Where one might have expected a warm handshake, a cup of coffee, and a “Cheerio, mate!”, John bellows forth in today’s gospel lesson, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” This is not a guy you would want on a welcoming committee or a public relations junket. When John entered a room, all those powerful people probably ran for the exits hoping their hair would avoid catching on fire.

But just as the scop (the medieval bard) spun a tale meant to awaken his hearers from their lethargy and slumber, John’s iconoclastic language was meant to shock his hearers out of their complacency and gain their attention. For, you see, it is quite easy in this season of food, family, and frivolity to find ourselves lulled to sleep by the sound of the Christmas carols and the hum of commerce all about us. But this woolly figure from the past insists that the road of adventure must begin not in Santa’s workshop but in the wilderness; and not with a summons to drunkenness and carousing, but with a call to repentance. The seasonal colors splashed all around us during Advent are filled with purple, not the reds and greens of Christmas, and there is a reason for this: the road to Bethlehem requires us to be stripped of all that might encumber us on this journey.

One of my favorite contemporary travel writers is Bill Bryson whose wry wit stands him in good stead when telling the tale of his own adventures. In one of his books entitled, *A Walk in the Woods*, he tells the story of a journey with his former college roommate, Stephen Katz, who flies in to meet him at the head of the Appalachian Trail from his home in Iowa. Unfortunately, Stephen (whom he has not seen in many years) has gained a great deal of weight and is in no shape to be hiking anywhere, let alone one of America’s longest and most rugged trail systems. Furthermore, he has not given much thought to the weight of his pack or the necessary provisions for the journey and so shows up with about seventy pounds of gear made up primarily of Hostess products like Ding-Dongs, Ho-Ho’s, and Twinkies—intended to provide nourishment over the several weeks spent on the trail. In one of the most hilarious bits of contemporary travel writing, Bryson tells how his friend finds himself so weighed down by snack cakes within hours of departure that he decides to start chucking them, hand over fist, into the ravine below—an action which not only deprives him of any form of sustenance for the days ahead, but leaves him on the point of despair.

In like manner, many of us may come to this season encumbered by expectations of creating the perfectly decorated house or the ideal Currier and Ives Christmas day family dinner. We expect our children to behave magnificently and our spouse to purchase us the perfect gift to (according to the advertisement) “last a lifetime.” But soon, all our visions begin to crumble and we find ourselves prone to grumble. Our children prove all too fallible and we discover our spouses once again to have feet of clay. Advent, though, is not a season of perfect gingerbread

houses, suggests the prophet John, but a time of ridding ourselves of all these unrealistic expectations. We are beckoned into a different land, perhaps even a barren place, during this time. We are called not to speed up and buy, but to slow down and listen. And, just as that opening word in Beowulf admonishes the reader to be still and to pay attention, John's language is meant to clear our hearts and minds and strip us bare of our pretense.

And there, once we find ourselves naked before God, we are called to repentance. In last Sunday's gospel lesson, in the verses which immediately precede ours, John was seen calling people to a "baptism of repentance." This idea of repentance comes to us wrapped in certain cultural packaging—a la the recent statements posted by one Tiger Woods. But Kathleen Norris challenges the way we oftentimes think about the word when she says in her book, *The Cloister Walk*, "Repentance is coming to our senses, seeing, suddenly, what we've done that we might not have done or recognizing. . . that the problem is not in what we do but in what we become." Recognizing the error of our ways is taken very seriously at the monastery where I spent last weekend with some of you who are present here this morning. While there, we encountered a very concrete example of a community which practices repentance. At early morning prayer last Sunday, when Fr. Harry, the esteemed professor of theology from Kentucky, made an error in the reading and the cantor sang the wrong song—they both were required to kneel before the monks as their compadres filed past at the end of the service to acknowledge and repent of their transgressions. Now, while we might consider such behavior totally unnecessary and a bit over the top, it demonstrates the seriousness with which Benedictines understand all of life as an opportunity to be conformed to the image of Christ in the everyday actions which make up our rather mundane lives. And, as flawed creatures, this requires us to both acknowledge and to repent of those behaviors which might take us in a very different direction.

But if our adventure begins with a call to listen and repent, much of the rest of today's texts begin moving us in a very different direction—a way of juxtaposition to these earlier images. For now that we find ourselves at the third Sunday of Advent, we have already covered a little over half of our journey. In fact, next Sunday our primary gospel character will not be the fiery John the Baptist, but the obedient and somewhat demure Virgin Mary. She and her message will stand in stark contrast to this fire-breathing prophet and will take us fully over into the New Testament or, as it is oftentimes referred to, "the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." By next Sunday we will have our eyes firmly fixed on Bethlehem and the manger and all of the joy that it portends. But today, at least for these few moments, we find ourselves neither at the beginning nor at the end but somewhere in between, caught between our hopes and our fears.

That is why the other cry that we hear today is a call to act. Notice that in today's gospel lesson three different groups—the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers—all ask John, "What are we to do?" And, in each case, the prophet offers up concrete activities—to share, to not overcharge, and to not extort money. These clear admonitions are paralleled in both our epistolary and Old Testament texts. Writing from prison to one of his favorite churches—that in Philippi—Paul commands (in the imperative) the receiving congregation to "rejoice" and to "not worry." The irony, of course, is that he, of all people, had every reason to complain and to be worried. Within

a matter of months, he would probably be dead and, although we don't know for sure his immediate circumstances, living a life in chains in a Roman prison could not have been very comfortable. And yet, he had the audacity to call his hearers to live a countercultural life of discipline and peace in the midst of the personal storm through which he, himself, was living.

Curiously enough, this same call to rejoice is sounded in this little book of the prophet Zephaniah. Now, most of us probably haven't spent a lot of time with this book tucked away near the end of our Old Testaments. But what I find so curious is that the entire text of this prophetic book is given over to indictments and woes. As some of you who are a bit more "hip" than I might describe it, this is a real "downer" of a book. Except for this one little passage which makes up today's reading. In the midst of terror and destruction comes a call to rejoice (twice) and to exult in the coming of the Lord. The setting for this text is probably what was known as the cry of the heralds who would call for public rejoicing because of the arrival of messengers bringing good news of victory or deliverance to the city (J. J. M. Roberts, 222). In the very midst of community life which is rooted in the reality of Exile and defeat, the people of God are beckoned to find hope as they anticipate what will yet be. This requires learning to pay careful attention to one's surroundings and to embrace them fully, while also living with the tension that something better has been promised.

In her book, *By Willoway Brook: Exploring the Landscape of Prayer*, Cindy Crosby links the life of prayer with her experience of living through a year in the natural landscape of the Schulenberg Prairie near Chicago. She challenges her readers to really begin to pay attention to the flora and fauna of one's surroundings as we pass through the various seasons and to do so as a cue to the mystery and goodness of God. She sits and stares at birds' eggs or dragonfly larva, anticipating their maturity into full-grown birds and insects. Her book is a summons to not miss the marvels of God at work in the world by failing to pay attention to the here-and-now as signals of what God has promised to do in our lives. At one point, she says quite baldly, "When I die, I want to know I have paid attention. To have read creation's journal from cover to cover, and not skimmed the pages," (35). Her intentionality and careful eye force me to try and slow down and embrace the moment in ways that seem so foreign to my own personality.

Perhaps that is why I found our trip back from St. Meinrad's the real challenge to my spiritual life—not the time there. I have been back and forth to monasteries, particularly this one, probably thirty or forty times. I enjoy watching students try to drink in what I first experienced on a beautiful April weekend now a full third of a century ago. In some ways, once the schedule has been set, the drill has become somewhat routine. But then we encountered the challenge of a vehicle that required constant attention and loving care as we nursed it back home, exiting the highway to look for compressed air several times along the way. As someone who is very focused and concerned about the welfare of students, my mind was caught up in the whirl of decisions necessary to bring the trip to its desired end. I found myself so tense that all my senses were trained on the future and oftentimes not paying adequate attention to the present.

That is when God really began to challenge me to quit being the One-in-Charge and start being a listener again. I marveled at the fact that we had a student on board whose father was a mechanic at the end of a cell phone line. This same student, undeterred by a tire that kept going flat, said at one point, "I love a crisis!"—words, I can assure you, that have never crossed my lips. And as I drove down the road intent on the horizon ahead, checking the mirrors on each side, trying to hold my bladder in check—another student reached across the cabin and patted my leg simply saying, "It's going to be alright, Dr. Hartley." It was only then that I began to think about how years from now whenever this class tells the story of our visit to the monastery it will be a unique one—a story of how we worked together to get everyone home safe and sound, a story about how God provided for us along the way, a story of excitement and danger, laughter and despair. In short, an Advent adventure that may well be told long after I am gone. And I was in grave danger of missing out on the story—simply because I was so focusing on finishing a task.

So, where is your attention focused this morning? Are you in danger of missing the adventure in life because of the "to-do" list that dominates your journey through the holidays? In the midst of putting up lights, baking desserts, and coordinating the kids through their Christmas activities, are you paying attention to the miracle of life that marks the season? Or, has the rush through work, exams, and all of the paraphernalia that makes up the end of the year so dominated your focus that you have failed to hear the words of this morning's lesson?— "The Lord is near...rejoice! Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," (Philippians 4: 4-7). Amen.