

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Liturgical Year A

December 9, 2007

St. Philip's, Brevard

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

When my daughter Elizabeth was little, like most children, she had a wonderful imagination. (She still has a wonderful imagination.) I remember one time listening to her play with her dolls. Lives were being lived. Dramas were being played out. Some members of a class Elizabeth was teaching had been acting out, and they were sent to “time out,” with instructions to let the teacher know when they thought they could handle coming back. Some of the dolls had quite active social lives. They were going to parties, and (no doubt reflecting the influence of Elizabeth’s older sister) there was much discussion about who was dating whom, who had been seen at what party, and which dress would be appropriate for which function. Of course, it turned out that none of them had anything to wear, and they all needed to go shopping.

Eavesdropping on a child’s imaginary world is one of the great pleasures in life, and it always reminds me of how much we adults have lost. Later, I said, “Elizabeth, when you’re done with your imagination may I borrow it?” She gave me a look I recognized. She always gives me that look when I’m being silly, and she’s going to be the grown-up. It’s a look like, “What am I going to do with you?” And I knew what was coming. I knew she was going to say, “No, Daddy, people can’t borrow other people’s imaginations.”

But she didn’t say that. What she said was, “No, Daddy; I don’t think I’ll ever be through with my imagination.” Good answer.

Today John the Baptist comes down out of the mountains thundering into Brevard shouting, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” He’s a wild man, living up in the mountains; living off the land; eating berries and roots and bugs. And his hair is wild, and his beard is wild, and he wears animal skins.

Y’all all know John the Baptist. He’s the guy you want to be really careful not to invite to your Christmas party. He hollers: “Repent!” And when good religious people come to him, confident of themselves because they come from good stock and are well thought of, he calls them snakes: “You brood of vipers,” and tells them that they’d *better* start bearing good fruit; they can’t rely on the past. They’d better have a vision for the future. They’d better. Because one is coming who is more powerful, and John says he’s not even worthy to carry this one’s sandals, and he will baptize with *fire*!

I’ll tell you the truth, I don’t usually think of this wild man—give ‘um hell—wide eyed—stark raving—John the Baptist in the same way I think of my sweet, quiet, gentle daughter, but they actually have something very important in common. They both have wonderful imaginations. John baptizes in the River Jordan and thunders at people to repent because he can imagine a different future. John has a vision of the future; he can imagine the kingdom of heaven coming near. And you can’t have that vision without that imagination. And you can’t get there if you don’t have the vision. So it starts with imagination. You have to use your imagination in a way that is not childish, but is very much childlike.

The prophet Isaiah, living in a time of war and conflict and defeat and exile and the charred smell of smoke from burned villages, had a childlike imagination and was able to give his people — and us — wonderful, poetic images of the kingdom to come. First he says that out of devastation (the image is a

tree that has been cut down), God will bring new life: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” And one shall come, and the

spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his — *mouth*, — and with the *breath of his lips* he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

What a wonderful prophecy of hope to a people who have been crushed, who cannot even imagine hope. A wonderful gift of imagination, of the image of God’s working in the world, even in the world of oppression and pain and defeat. Isaiah can imagine it. And with childlike imagination, Isaiah sings poetic the images of peace and reconciliation and harmony: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid” You know these beautiful verses. And the stunning final line: “And the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

I’m a sucker for poetry, and Isaiah’s is some of the best. But it’s easy for us to dismiss this image as just poetry. “Of course the wolf will not really live with the lamb,” we say. “Of course the leopard will not really lie down with the kid,” we say. This is a nice vision, we say, of some “pie in the sky” unreality that will never come to pass, we say.

We adults say. Because we adults so easily miss the point about this vision, this imagining, of what God’s kingdom, God’s reign, God’s action, is like. No, I don’t think we have to believe that the animals will all be sweet together, but that’s not the point. The point is that we have to imagine something that’s hard for us to imagine. Imagine a future in which harmony and peace are the dominant themes of existence. It’s hard, isn’t it? We see the news, and we say, “No way. I’m too smart for that. I’m too worldly for that. I’m too grownup for that.”

That’s why John the Baptist was so forceful, because it’s hard to get grownups to imagine a future that is the kingdom of heaven. But let’s try. Let’s repent of our grownup, cynical, impoverished imaginations, and let’s let ourselves play, let’s let our children play. Let’s imagine our lives living God’s kingdom. St. Paul says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Let’s ask: “What would my life look like if it were full of hope and joy and peace and believing and the Holy Spirit?” *Full* of those things. Nothing held back. Truthfully, it’s hard for me to imagine. But I’m going to play, and I’m going to imagine it. Let yourself play, and imagine your life that way.

What would St. Philip’s be like if y’all fully St. Paul’s advice to “welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God?” What would our diocese, our Episcopal Church, be like if we were the enfleshment of the kingdom of heaven; what would it mean to us? What would it mean to the people outside our walls? Let yourself imagine it.

And now the hardest of all: what would the world be like if it really was “full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea?” What would be important to us? Boundaries? Protectionism? The acquisition of wealth? Nationalism? Or food for the hungry? Shelter for the homeless? Clothes for the naked? Justice? Mercy? Respect for the dignity of every human being?

It wouldn't be easy. Good, faithful people would still disagree about how to best accomplish their goals, but imagine, as a child would imagine, the nightly news if the disagreements were about how to best accomplish the goals set by the kingdom of heaven, and the arguments were conducted by people who respected one another's dignity and saw God in each other. Just for a moment, a fleeting moment perhaps, imagine it.

It's worthwhile going through these exercises because the kingdom of heaven is hard to imagine. But I hope we will hear how Isaiah and John imagine God's kingdom; and I hope we all take a cue from Elizabeth; I hope we are never through with our imaginations.

John can imagine a future of God's reign, but even he can't imagine what the most imaginative Being in the universe has in store for us. John bellows:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and *fire*. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will *burn* with *unquenchable fire*.

But Isaiah whispers: "And a little child shall lead them."

Imagine that.

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