

"Who Will Lead Us?"
Isaiah 11:1-10 Matthew 3:1-12
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.
December 9, 2007

This is a responsive sermon that is built around Hymn 465, "Teach Me, O Lord, Your Holy Way." I will invite you to sing verses 1, 2, and 4 at designated places in the sermon.

You will soon learn about me that I believe it is healthy to go into matters of faith armed with good questions. As we read the Gospels it seems that Jesus always had questions swirling around him. Actually, the questions began even before Jesus arrived on the scene. When his predecessor, John the Baptist, began preaching, many people wondered if he was the long-awaited Messiah. They were hungry for leadership so they wanted to find out if John was the one who had come to lead them. John did have an important function, but he made it clear that he was pointing beyond himself to another who was yet to appear. John called upon people to repent – that is to say, to "Make the way straight for the Lord" in their hearts and lives. Implied in John's proclamation we can easily discover the question, "Who is this Lord who will lead us?"

We must remember that not everyone who came to submit to John's baptism had an honest heart. Many who came were not particularly interested in following a leader on a journey of transformation. Rather, they were looking for a leader who would affirm their social and religious acceptability so that they could take what they considered to be their rightful place at the head of the line for the heavenly rewards. John was not about to be fooled by their deceptive ways. He called them on their game. Then he made it clear to them that there could be no shortcut to God. Baptism was merely a step in the direction of a more thorough and transforming baptism of spirit and fire.

As we read this passage from Matthew, John's challenging language might startle us. It makes Jesus sound like someone who is coming to be judgmental and punitive. Read superficially, it sounds like John is saying that the good people are to be saved while the bad people will certainly be destroyed.

So, who is this Messiah that God has sent to lead us? Is Jesus simply coming into the world to lead the good people to their reward and send the bad people to their punishment? If we look from an "Either/or", "All-or-nothing" perspective, that's what it looks like. As popular as that interpretation may be, I must confess to you, that I cannot make it square with the qualities and behaviors I find in the rest of Jesus' life and ministry.

Is it possible then that there is another perspective available to us? Try this. Jesus goes to great pains to convince people not to be judgmental, and he consistently paints a picture of God as the epitome of love and as the one for whom all things are possible. So, perhaps the one who will lead us does not lead us out of the fire into comfort. Rather, the one who will lead us leads us through the fire of transformation. I would suggest to you that the image of Jesus as the one who baptizes with fire and who holds the winnowing fork to clear the threshing floor of the chaff is not intended to be a terrifying image. It is only terrifying if we begin with the assumption that people can be divided into the good ones and the bad ones. But, that is not our Jesus. And so we sing Verse 1:

*Verse 1 Teach me, O Lord, your holy way,
And give me an obedient mind,
That in your service I may find
My heart's delight from day to day.*

From this different point of view, the image of Jesus is a welcome one indeed. It paints a picture of a leader who has the means to break through our fear, our reactivity, our shortsightedness, our prejudices, and our pervasive sense that we won't get enough of what we need. We can be comforted by coming to understand that the baptism of fire has the power to burn away those parts of each one of us that stand in the way of our full participation in the Kingdom of God.

John the Baptist also has a question for us. His question is not about whether we can give an intellectual, or even an emotional, acceptance to Jesus as the one who will do all the spiritual work for us. John demands that we decide if we are willing to follow this leader, no matter where he leads us. John invites us to repent, but not simply to endure the ordeal. He does not ask us to prove how good or how faithful we are. Rather, he points us to the leader who can bring us to our full expression of the living image of God.

Clearly, the kind of leader we choose to follow makes all the difference in the world. As I said last week, not only is Advent about getting ready for the baby Jesus, but it is also getting ready for the Return of Christ. Much of Christianity believes that this second coming will be characterized by Jesus anger at our sinfulness and at our apparent inability to accept him as Lord. I beg to differ. I do not see Jesus as coming in anger. I see Jesus as coming in love. Jesus is coming once again to lead us to and through the fire. These are not fires of annihilation. They are fires of purification and transformation that serve to heal, not destroy us. And so we affirm with our singing Verse 2:

*Verse 2 Help me, O Savior, here to trace
The sacred footsteps you have trod;
And fully trusting in my God,
To grow in goodness, truth, and grace.*

You will find that I use the word "Transformation" a lot in my preaching and teaching. I am convinced that the most significant factor in Christian life and practice has to do with our accepting that the Gospel changes us in very specific and identifiable ways. Without that reality of expected change, we are just like those people who came to John the Baptist looking for a short cut. They did not want or expect to be changed. They wanted their superiority over the rest of humanity to be validated. There is much I do not know about God and about the spiritual and religious life. But this I have come to know: It is impossible to encounter God in any way without being changed by the experience. While the change may be painful or temporarily confusing, it is never bad. In fact, the quality of life is enriched in countless ways by the experience.

Let me give you a small example of what transformation can look like. I live in a community that has two neighborhoods of 30 households each. All of us who live there have made a commitment

to make our decisions by a process known as "Consensus". The consensus process goes far beyond the objective of a coming to a unanimous decision. True consensus is based on people getting to know one another in deeper and deeper ways. I find that the experience of getting to know others deeply changes me in surprising ways.

At one point we were struggling over an issue about how to refund some money in the most ethical and just way. In the process several of us reached an impasse. Each side could not accept the decision that the other side seemed to represent. In conventional politics, it would have led to a very nasty battle. Instead, those of us who had the strongest feelings on the two sides of this issue decided to meet together, not to work out a compromise exactly, but to gain a deep enough understanding of one another's thinking (and feeling) that we would be able to come up with a solution that truly met the needs of all involved. What is significant about this example is that it was necessary for each one of us to go into this meeting expecting to be changed by what we heard from those on the other side of the issue. We did not expect it to be a battle for the supremacy of one idea over another because the purpose of our meeting was not adversarial. We knew we were on the same team.

Unfortunately, our existing political and religious structures do not encourage us to learn from one another. Most of the emphasis is on defending our favored answer against all comers. We end up dividing people into those we consider to be the good ones and those we consider to be the bad ones. The good ones matter; the bad ones don't. There can be little growth once we take sides.

I will tell you honestly that the consensus process is difficult. It is not easy to listen to other points of view. It is sometimes painful to see the limitations and shortcomings of our own carefully constructed positions. It is not comforting to discover that your integrity requires you to behave in ways that you never imagined possible or to adopt positions that you never imagined you would hold. The fires of transformation operate on us in the deepest levels of our being. The fires of transformation clear away all unsubstantiated opinions. The fires of transformation require us to trust our deepest identity as people who are created in the image of God. If God truly is the foundation of our very being, then our human answers can never be complete. If we choose to follow the Christ who leads us to and through the fires of transformation then we know that our understandings will always be subject to further development and modification.

It is essential that we understand the character of our chosen leader so we know what we are choosing. Therefore I ask you, do you want a leader who will simply identify what is right and what is wrong and then require you to obey? Or will you choose, in faith, to follow a leader who will always be present in your lives: encouraging, supporting, and challenging you every day? Advent is the time to ask and answer this central question. And so we pray by singing Verse 4:

Verse 4 *Bless me in every task I face,
Begun, continued, done for you;
Fulfill your will in all I do,
And grant me your abundant grace.*

May God be with you as you decide.