

Third Sunday in Advent 11 Dec 2016

[Isaiah 35: 1-10; Song of Mary – Magnificat; James 5: 7-10 ; Matthew 11: 2-11](#) Vanderbilt Divinity Library,

Advent 3A December 11, 2016 Textweek

In the readings today we hear three iconic voices of Advent; Isaiah, Mary and John the Baptist. Each voice is quite different, but what they have in common is that they are very much Advent voices, they are voices that speak before the reality of birth; and perhaps in that regard they are also in common with us as we wait for Christmas and for our Nativity.

Isaiah looks beyond “the wilderness and the dry land”; he looks beyond to a vision in which “waters shall break forth in the wilderness”; the breaking waters of both birth and baptism.

Rather than pointing toward the hoped for Messiah; Isaiah sees a reality, a vision of life that is beyond the mundane pattern of the everyday.

When we ourselves look back in time we can see amazing changes that have taken place in the evolution of humanity; and even in our own lives, if we go back to our childhood, many of us would not have imagined back then a life lived as we live it today.

Well, Isaiah’s Advent voice is a voice, an insight, that goes even further; for he sees a new way of living, a new way of being who we are; a new path that perhaps requires us to bring to birth a higher and more Divine nature within ourselves;

“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.”

Isaiah has a vision; one that we walk into reality; it does not come neatly wrapped in swaddling clothes, nor Christmas paper; it is not in the hands of another to realise, rather it is a path that we ourselves walk into being.

Mary’s Advent voice speaks differently and yet it opens for us another opportunity to contemplate our Nativity; for Mary serves an illustration of ‘God-bearer’.

If we take away the stories that were introduced by Luke and Matthew to give a symbolic and traditional context for Christ’s teachings, then we have in Mary another example of a new creation, and a new reality being brought into being.

To contemplate Mary we have to let go of the rational, the logical and the literal, for they will only delude us into a nonsense; ‘the mother of God gives birth to the one who created everything including the mother of God!’

No wonder that critical atheists find it so easy to throw the baby out with the bath water.

However, Mary, like Isaiah, is an Advent icon that points us toward our true Nativity.

Her affirmative “Yes” to the annunciation from the angel, is a turning toward new birth: a realisation that God is brought to birth from within ourselves; and by our very active participation in the process of creation.

Mary asks us to consider how we:

“proclaim the greatness of the Lord”

“Magnify the Divine”

And bring to life, bring into our life, the teaching, actions and the very being of Christ.

Even those of us who experience the barrenness of life, those of us, like Abraham and Sarah, who feel too old to contemplate birth; we too can look to Mary for encouragement and affirmation. As Mick Jagger discovered this past week, we’re never too old to give birth to new life.

And so to the third voice, that of John the Baptist; another Advent voice and again one that speaks from before the place of birth.

Although John is a contemporary of Jesus, he is still an Advent voice; a voice that precedes the birth; however in this instance it is the Easter Tomb rather than the manger that provide the place of birth and that very much adds depth to the whole Christmas ‘event’; for the Nativity itself is an icon of a new reality, a new and enlightened way of being.

John most probably started out with the voice and vision of Isaiah; and he lived the reality of Mary proclaiming the “greatness of the Lord”; and here in Advent he speaks from doubt, or perhaps from hope;

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

And perhaps that is our question at this point in our Advent.

As we look into the mirror of life; as we look for all that is awaiting birth in us do we find an echo of Isaiah, do we hear an echo of Mary or are we to be found in the wondering and the questioning of John?

Is this time for us to be God-bearers and to walk the highway of Isaiah into a new and different reality; or do we wait for another?

John’s question comes from what T S Eliot speaks of as the “still point”;

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is...”

And perhaps the Advent highway that Isaiah speaks of takes us to the crossroad of Christmas, with one of the roads leading to Bethlehem and to the place of our birth..

However, we will have to pause in the still point of Advent in order to choose our path forward; but we've been here before and already have forgotten the choice we made before.

like John the Baptist, we have glimpsed the vision of Isaiah, and have opened our soul's womb for the incarnation, but now in Advent we seem doubt filled and hope filled with the very same question that John voices.

If we look back to the readings we will see some patterns from Isaiah and from the gospel narrative, patterns that perhaps illuminate the signposts at the crossroads...

Both readings use 'wilderness' as a reference point and we too can look into the mirror of our life and seek the wilderness, the place of barren growth, the place of dryness and of drought.

And in a similar way both readings describe the reality of our being 'in Christ'.

Isaiah speaks of a reality in which

"the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

Is this my reality, or do I need to take another path forward in order to make this the reflection when I look into the mirror of my life.

The gospel narrative echoes almost the same vision of life:

"the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

These two almost identical life descriptions guide us at the Advent crossroad...

"Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance."

Eliot's words, like Mary can be words that affirm and encourage, for from here, in the still point of Advent, even filled with John's doubt, or hope, we stand at the place where there is only the dance.. And so we stand in a movement toward our nativity.