

December 4, 2016  
Advent 2, Year C, RCL  
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Isaiah 11:1-10  
Psalm 72:1-7,18-19  
Romans 15:4-13  
Matthew 3:1-12

“May the God of hope fill [us] with all joy and peace in believing, so that [we] may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Amen.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the liturgical season of preparation for Christmas.

During Advent, some churches host what are called “Blue Christmas” worship services. If you haven’t heard of this, Blue Christmas services stem from the recognition that, for many people, the days leading up to Christmas are anything but merry and bright. For those who are grieving or unemployed or lonely or a host of other things besides merry and bright, the holidays can be especially difficult, and so “the blues” set in. One result of this is that attendance at 12-step meetings skyrockets from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Blue Christmas services are intended to help church-goers navigate the disconnect they experience between Christmas cheer that is culturally compulsory but personally absent.

The more general challenge for Christians is that our society includes not one but two Christmases. One Christmas is the sacred Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus; the other is a cultural holiday that is largely secular in nature. Some people recognize only one of the two; most of *us* recognize and prepare for both. It’s the cultural side of the pre-Christmas coin that goes on about merry and bright. The sacred side is definitely less shiny. That mysterious patina *exactly* why it’s important that we not let the secular completely consume the sacred. The sacred side of Advent the Advent coin is too valuable to squander. If that’s not immediately evident, consider that Advent is paradoxical: we are encouraged to stop and to fully occupy our present location; that stillness prepares us for the next movement.

As far as Advents go, this one feels particularly tricky. I always get a little pensive come December. The leaves have fallen, the air has turned cool, and the geese have started south. Such changes are invitations to ponder the transitions in our own lives. They encourage us to prepare for the work that will come along with real and metaphorical winters. That’s usual, but this year there’s more, and I’m feeling extra pensive. On the spectrum of color, blue and red lie at opposite ends, and green is in the middle. If I were to mark my spot on the spectrum, for sure I would be closer to blue than to red. You might color me green with a large dollop of blue.

I attribute much of my extra-pensive to the election. I think it’s fair to say that the post-election world is very different than the pre-election one. Presumptions that we took for granted have been shaken; our minds have been blown. Compared with past national leadership transitions, we have so many questions: What do the results of the election mean for women? For people of color? For immigrants? For people who are LGBTQ? For people who are poor and unemployed? Perhaps most importantly, for the environment and the future of the planet? As someone whose life revolves around the search for truth, I have been particularly struck by this question: how does one navigate through a world that has been dubbed *post-truth*?<sup>2</sup>

On the second Sunday of Advent, the gospel reading is always about John the Baptist at the Jordan River. This year, year A of our three-year lectionary cycle, we heard the version from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew, Mark, and Luke differ in some important details, but the core of their stories is the same: John is helping prepare people, to help prepare the way, for the impending coming of the Messiah. “Repent,” he says, “for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the details from the reading from Matthew is this: “John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist.”<sup>4</sup> It is this description that makes images of John the Baptist so readily identifiable. In art, he wears a belted brown thigh-length shirt that is shown in various degrees of wooliness and raggedness. In the movies, he looks and acts like a wild man.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a tradition began of artists depicting John and Jesus together at very young ages. According to the Gospel of Luke, John and Jesus are cousins born only months apart. Because Mary was said to have visited John’s mother Elizabeth, so one might imagine that Jesus and John knew one another while growing up. In the paintings, Jesus and John are both either babies, toddlers, or small children. But they’re not just kids having fun. Regardless of their age, John is shown either with a camel-hair cloth or wearing a little camel-hair shirt. This is true even when Jesus and John are depicted as otherwise naked. Always, little camel-hair-clad John has an age-appropriate-size walking staff with a cross at the top; sometimes, a lamb is nearby.<sup>5</sup>

At first those images of Jesus and John are kind of funny, but they’re also disturbing. The cross and lamb are symbols that foreshadow the adult sacrifices to come. For these children, death lurks in plain sight. These images are funny and disturbing, but this Advent I’ve come to appreciate them. They appear to make time fold over on itself. Jesus and John are marked, not just for death, but also for resurrection. Events will throw a lot at them, but deep down they are always those unblemished children, God’s hope given flesh and life in the world. Messiah and prophet, they are born in preparation for the long and winding journey home.

I wonder: can’t those words be used to describe each of us? At birth we are marked for death and resurrection; events will throw a lot at us, but deep down we are always unblemished children, God’s hope given flesh and life; we are born in preparation for the long and winding journey home.

If we have questions about what’s next, it’s worth nothing that John and his predecessors in the Hebrew Scriptures were completely disgusted with the condition of their world. Returning to our color spectrum, it’s easy to imagine them cycling back and forth between sad blue and angry red. Listening for God’s call and then responding, they became prophets who acted both in word and in deed, lending their voices and their bodies to God’s desire.

We aren't Messiahs, but we too can be prophets: people who listen for God's call and then lend our voices and bodies to God's desire. Maybe you have trouble picturing yourself in that role. Remember, because we live in a different time and place, today's prophet would look different than John the Baptist. Therefore it might be helpful to imagine John wearing something other than what appears to be a deteriorating animal skin. I looked up "camel hair" on Wikipedia, and the first thing I noticed was a photograph of a beautiful year 2009 Bill Blass camel-colored camel-hair men's blazer.<sup>6</sup> So let's imagine John wearing a worn but comfortable Bill Blass blazer. His hair and beard, while not model-stylish, is clean and neat. John might even be a woman. If we can get that far, maybe we can imagine ourselves as prophets.

We may have trepidation about the future, but I am convinced that our brand of Christianity is especially suited to respond, and therefore especially needed. We might call this moment in history an opportunity, but I think it is actually more an imperative. It is an imperative to which this congregation is blessed to be uniquely suited to respond, because of its theology, its practice, its location, its demographics, and more. This week marked my first anniversary at St. Thomas's. It's a great place to be, and the prospects are exciting. But acting requires first listening, and so we're back to Advent.

On the color spectrum, if you move even farther away from red, right through blue, you end up at purple, the color commonly used to recognize Advent. That's not a bad place to be. Sometimes, *just where we are* is sometimes *just what God needs*. The word in today's Gospel that is translated as repentance literally means to turn—in this case, to turn toward God. God shows up wherever we are, but it's a good idea to make a practice of really paying attention. From time of the earliest church, the wise ones have recognized a balance between contemplation and action. For now, our job is to observe Advent, by fully occupying our current location, by pondering deeply, by focusing on what God is saying to us, and by contemplating what it means for this to be a congregation of prophets—people who listen and then act, in both word and deed.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Romans 15:13, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jennifer Schuessler, “‘Post-Truth’ Defeats ‘Alt-Right’ as Oxford’s Word of the Year,” The New York Times, November 15, 2016, available online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/arts/post-truth-defeats-alt-right-as-oxfords-word-of-the-year.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/arts/post-truth-defeats-alt-right-as-oxfords-word-of-the-year.html?_r=0) (accessed December 2, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:2, NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3:4a, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the painting by [Bartolomé Esteban Murillo](#), available on Wikipedia Commons at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:InfantJesus\\_JohnBaptist.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:InfantJesus_JohnBaptist.JPG) (accessed December 2, 2016). The image is pasted above.

<sup>6</sup> “Camel hair,” Wikipedia, available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camel\\_hair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camel_hair) (accessed December 2, 2016).