

Are you the one...or are we to look for another?..What did you go out to look at...what did you go out to see? Someone in soft robes? (Matthew)

Some years ago before the abolition of apartheid in South Africa, Desmond Tutu, sometime recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and then Archbishop of Cape Town, addressed a conference of English bishops. Members of the international press, including those of South Africa, were present.

If you have ever seen the Archbishop in person you have experienced his charisma. Whenever he walks into a room he lights it up with sparkling eyes, a bright, radiant smile and laughter. No one can escape the genuine fire of love and the generosity that emanated from his heart and soul. In this particular gathering of Bishops, there was a moment when Archbishop's antiapartheid rhetoric so angered members of the South African press that many walked out in protest. There soon followed scathing reports of his speech. When asked about this later, Tutu said: "In my country we have a saying: 'If you go out to see a lion, do not be surprised when you hear a lion roar.' These people came out to see Tutu. Why were they so surprised to hear the words of Tutu?"

Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, and more than a prophet...my messenger who will prepare your way...

This little story of Desmond Tutu and the scripture from Matthew invites us, this third Sunday of Advent, to re-examine our understanding of Christmas. Traditionally the third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete Sunday* or the Sunday of Joy, is the day we light the third candle (rose) of our Advent wreaths. It is a Sunday of dramatic mixed messages.

In an earlier time, Advent was a season of preparation—not unlike Lent of penitence and preparation — to prepare for the coming of the Lord, the coming of the Holy One. In recent years, the penitential aspect of the season—purple candles and vestments like those of Lent—have given way to a more celebratory, joy-filled making-ready for the Christ child. The rose-colored candle has less meaning today than when it signified a welcomed break in the austere preparations for Christmas. Thus, this third Sunday represents a day of mixed messages, penitence and joy, excitement about the messenger but agony over the message. It is a day to re-examine our Christmas preparations. The question is: what are we waiting for these days leading up to Christmas?

Might we be spending time worrying about the birth of our first grandchild? Are we awaiting another percentage drop in the prime? Are we awaiting the return of American service women and men from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Are we hoping that the soft real estate market will bounce big in the New Year? How much do we really need a flat-screen, high definition television? Are we hoping for an early acceptance of a child in college and a generous financial package to boot? Are we hoping for a turn around or at least a steadying of the volatile stock market? Are we hoping for better health? What do we anticipate in the coming of the Holy One this Christmas?

Might we be surprised, even offended by the Holy One this Christmas? Are we seeking someone in soft cuddly robes? Will we, like the South African reporters, turn away and take offense at the Holy One who comes to cleanse the lepers, cure the deaf, raise the dead, and give sight to the blind? Who and what are we looking for this Christmas—the Messiah or a gentle baby in our image? Are we looking for that which will make **us** happy or, that which is of God?

John the Baptist, one of the principal characters of Advent (especially the second and third Sundays) stands in a long line of prophets in the history of Israel. Like Amos before him, and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, John was called from the midst of the everyday to speak the word of God to the people of God. More than mere mouthpieces for God's rebukes, warnings and promises, these were men of flesh and blood. Theirs was a message burning in their hearts leaping to life through words of fire—the lion's roar like Desmond.

In Zaferrelli's "Jesus of Nazareth" there is a vivid scene when Michael York, in the role of John the Baptist, confronts the pietistic, haughty religious leaders of his day. With crowds from Jerusalem, all have come to see for themselves this outlandish prophet in the wilderness. Like those who went out from Washington in the very first months of the Civil War to the Virginia countryside to witness what they assumed would be the genteel skirmishing of the Confederate and Union armies, onlookers and soldiers alike were transformed. That war, like all war, was fueled by haughty rhetoric at the outset. The devastation beyond anyone's imagining turned that fanciful war into the bloodiest and cruelest carnage of young, innocent life America has ever seen. Almost 150 years ago the lion roared and we have never been the same. With that as our wake-up call, what are we expecting these days before Christmas? Is it filled with sugar plums, or does it resound with the power of our mighty God?

Advent is a time of prophets and prophecy, watchmen and women on the mountain tops and the city walls who announce coming of the Lord. We await our God who comes not only as a little child—meek and mild—but also as our mighty God who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire!

Within the church, we tend to promote "culturally appropriate" Christmas celebrations, often avoiding the searing words of the prophets cascading down around us this time of the year. What would it feel like if the person of John the Baptist rose in this pulpit, pointed a finger of retribution and declared: "*you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath which is to come*". No doubt it would be the quickest way to clear the pews of a Sunday morning. I suspect a rare few among us might return the following Sunday to see if the message had been modified. Jesus asks, what are you expecting to see? A message shaped by sugarplums and spice, or a message that is of God?

The hue and cry of many preachers this time of the year is to be aware and to be alert, not to lose sight of our true preparation: Jesus, the heart of Christmas. My hope this morning is that we examine our assumptions and expectations of Christmas. May we with insight and deeper understanding attend faithfully to the paradoxical nature of these days in anticipation of the coming of the Holy One. We need not be afraid. But a reminder: there is immense power in small things. A seed, a word, a moment of quiet on a snowy Sunday morning like this, an infant child. These are simple things, yet so full of power; paradoxical power. This is what makes Christmas so wonderful and amazing—God's gift of love awakening in us, not what we want to see, but what God wills for us is know and believe.