

PAYING ATTENTION

Malachi 3: 1-4

Philippians 1: 3-11

Luke 3: 1-6

[Second Sunday in Advent, 10 December 2006, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, McLean, Virginia]

- I think it was the report of early morning fisticuffs in the K-Mart the day after Thanksgiving – the urgent and uncompromising pursuit of consumer goods that has more and more come to characterize our culture – that took my breath away and reminded me of how much we need the even more urgent and moving message of the Advent season, this remarkable gift from God that challenges us to pause and wait and stay awake to watch for the love that is at hand. The love that is breaking into our lives, even (and perhaps especially) in the aisles of K-Mart.
- I am the eldest child of a Lutheran minister and I recall countless Sunday mornings, sitting in the front pew with Mom, dutifully taking notes on Dad's sermon so that we could have a discussion at Sunday dinner. "Punitive" comes to my mind when I remember my reaction to this family ritual – "of course I listen to what you're saying, Dad!" But with plenty of hindsight, I now know deep in my heart that Dad was teaching me a lesson that has shaped my life – he was reminding me to "pay attention," to attend to the Word, the words of grace and hope and peace, to love breaking into our lives as God's faithful people.
- This Advent I'm especially mindful of how the messengers and messages of this liturgical season are relevant to our lives in the world, helping us to pay attention in a world full of distractions. Last week's gospel foretold the "signs" that we would see, signs of the coming of the Son of Man, signs that were like the leaves of a fig tree--pointing to the summer ahead, even as the new life and green of summer were already at hand and in view. Are you keeping watch, Luke asks? Are you awake? Are you paying attention to the grace and promise of God's reign?
- And now comes John the Baptist – the one who was called to prepare the way for the Lord. John the Baptist, part of the remarkable company of Advent witnesses to God's reign – witnesses like Zechariah and Elizabeth, like Mary (and Joseph), the shepherds, the wise royals into whose lives God came with the upsetting and surprising call that you have been chosen to help God come into the world, so that God might be with us, taking on our human nature, bearing the sins of the world, dying so that we might be saved. Pay attention for God is here – stay awake because there is work to do – be not afraid for God is with us.
- John the Baptist is quite the tale – we don't get much of the story in this morning's gospel, but it is all right to recall the entire narrative... This brave guy – Jesus' cousin - goes out to prepare the way; his is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He preaches repentance, wears some really uncomfortable clothes, baptizes in the river Jordan, and proclaims that he is simply the set-up man for the one who is more powerful than he, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And in the end, of course, we may recall that John loses his head, but not before Jesus sends word to John in prison that his work was not in vain. “I am the One of whom you foretold,” Jesus says. Job well done, faithful servant. Thanks for helping the world to pay attention. Thanks for helping the reign of God to commence. Thanks for bringing the word of God’s love, the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth.

- I find John’s work to help the world pay attention to God’s reign breaking in particularly instructive for our own faithful lives – our various Advent witnesses all were called to do God’s work in ways that we might want to heed. At Augsburg College, we are particularly focused on what we can learn from the calls - the vocations - of these faithful witnesses, for our own vocational journeys. What does John teach us about our 21st century lives of faith?
- *Nobody said it would be easy.* This is such a tough message for all of us – especially for our young people. In a world where greedy fighting for electronics and toys in the aisles of K-Mart is part of our national character, how can we expect to overcome the sense of entitlement that invades all aspects of our personal and public lives? I deserve that scholarship, that car, that job, that relationship, that stock option, that respect...John accepted his call, and though I imagine he had his share of doubts along the way, he did what God expected of him – he prepared the way for the One who was to come. He called the world to pay attention to God’s reign and he gave up his comfort, his livelihood, his safety, his status, and ultimately his life, to live his call. The way of discipleship, the German theologian and World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells us, is “costly.” The cross is more than a symbol of our faith – it is a way of faithful and joyful living – and nobody said it would be easy.
- *Keep your faith and keep your wits.* This is the stuff of patience, which may be the most essential skill for faithful living in the world – and John was surely a role model of patience. Why didn’t he just run away and save himself? I have been thinking about this lesson a good bit recently as I consider the example of our friend (and Augsburg graduate), Martin Sabo, whose remarkable career of public service is about to conclude as he retires from Congress. How did he do it over these past almost 50 years? Surely he models a life of patience for all of us. He listens carefully, he discusses and reflects, he waits for wisdom and insight, he prays and worships, he considers the wider context and important relationships, he is not afraid to take an unpopular position if it is in pursuit of the greater good. He makes our world a better place. Now I don’t imagine Martin will appreciate comparison to John the Baptist – he is the consummate modest Norwegian-American – but I believe that John’s example of faithful living, pointing to the One who was to come, coupled with his intentional living, keeping his wits, if you will, as he doggedly went about his daily business, helps us to understand what it means to be patient. And Martin is a modern-day witness to how faithful and intentional living – the stuff of patience – is the essential skill for our lives in the world.
- *Turn, turn, turn because God’s love is about to break in again and again.* John’s ministry was to call the people of his time to repentance, to turn away from their sinful ways because God’s love was about to break in. I come to baptize with

water, John proclaimed, but the One who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. The One who is coming will make all things new. The late Lutheran theologian and preacher, Joseph Sittler, once said that the whole of the Christian life is summed up in the liturgical formula, “O God, from whom no secrets are hid.” Wow. That is John’s more than ever relevant message for all of us. Your God knows you – your God has named you – your God loves you – no secrets are hidden from God’s loving gaze. Turn away from your sins because life abundant is yours through the graceful gift of faith. You are my beloved, our God says, turn to me and all things will be new.

- Now comes John the Baptist as our Advent witness to God’s great love – the messenger sent to make the way straight, to set the stage, to call us to pay attention to love breaking into the darkness of our lives. To pay attention to a God who knows us so well – who knows it won’t be easy, who knows we will struggle to keep our faith and our wits, who knows how difficult it is to turn away from our comfortable lives – and because God knows us, God does not leave us alone.
- Now, of course, our call to pay attention is different from the call that John the Baptist received – all vocations are different, using our distinctive gifts to do God’s work in the world. But the work to be done remains as relevant as ever. John’s work was redeemed by the One who was to come – remember Jesus’ confirmation that he was the One foretold. Our work already has been confirmed and redeemed. This Advent, may we pursue God’s work for our time, may we pay attention to the ways in which love breaks into our world, again and again. It is our Advent call. Shall we pay attention together – pay attention to the needs of the world – pay attention for peace, for our children, for a living wage, for a world that knows no hunger, for justice in the land, for a sustainable earth, for common purpose? Will you pay attention and give up your comfort and safety – perhaps even your life – to do God’s will? There is work to be done, a promise to be fulfilled, life abundant to know and enjoy.
- I remember a time in my life when I paid special attention – it was at my mom’s bed in a hospice as she took her last breaths. “Stay awake for night is coming - your God is at hand,” we prayed. We kept vigil, we kept watch, we paid attention until the promise was fulfilled.
- God sends us John the Baptist, his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth, his aunt Mary, the shepherds and wise royals. God sends us my mom and dad and Martin Sabo and countless other faithful witnesses whose lives teach us to pay attention. God sends us this community of faithful brothers and sisters, who gather here like millions of others around the world and across the ages, to bear testimony to the love of God breaking into our world, breaking into the bleak and dark night with a message of faith and hope and love. God sends us a baby in the manger who makes all things new. Pay attention. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.