

Second Sunday of Advent (B), 2011

One of the things that happens to you when you've been part of a faith community for a good length of time is that certain things that the communities does become familiar traditions. One of our traditional Advent decorations is that banner back there. How many of you remember Phyllis Kirkman? Phyllis died several years ago, but she was one of the founding members of St. Bridget, with many talents that she freely offered to our community. One of those talents was that she was a gifted religious artist, and that banner back there was one of her creations. The figure on the top is the prophet Isaiah, whom we heard from in our first reading today, and that little thing you see by his mouth is a burning coal that one of the seraphim angels brought from the altar of the Holy of Holies, to be placed on his mouth, to prepare him to announce the word of God. And as we know, Isaiah did have many fiery words of doom and condemnation for Israel. Underneath Isaiah is the austere figure of John the Baptist, dressed in his camel's hair garment. Certainly we all remember that John's words could act like a whip – "You brood of vipers!"

Both Isaiah and John could be full of fire, and if you are like I am, that may be the Advent message that you've generally taken from these two prophets. I know that's what I often focus on; after all, our gospel even says that John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Well yes, it does. And in fact, if you add in our second reading from the letters of St. Peter, which talks about the day of the Lord coming like a thief, after which the heavens will pass away with a roar and everything will be dissolved in fire, it's easy to get a frightful eschatological message, a grim reminder of the end time. That sober message IS there in the scripture. However...

Alongside those words are other words, and I think they're much more important words.

I spent time with a young mom this week. She has a teenage daughter who has been through an accident, and her mother is with here day and night, doing two things. The first thing is to care for her daughter. There is a schedule posted on the wall, and every two hours, day and night, she gets up and cares for her daughter. She rotates braces on her daughter's arms and legs, feeds her daughter her meals, changes her position on the bed from one side to another, or up into a hoist and down into a wheelchair. She sometimes changes her, and she talks to her, though her daughter is unable to answer. The other thing she does, is pray. She prays all the time. She prays for a miracle. I prayed with her, and I'll pray for her again today. I really wish I had the power to grant miracles. And the words of our scriptures today are for them.

That mother and daughter are suffering, but they're not alone. In a few minutes, after our creed but before we take up our offering, we'll offer prayers as a community. During those intentions we'll remember others who are in need, many of them we've been holding in prayer for a long time – pay special attention to those intentions today. For the words of our scriptures today are especially for those people we pray for.

My friends, the most compelling message in our scriptures today is not what we would expect from two fiery prophets. The most important message is the very first word of the first reading: "Comfort." That's not a noun, that's a *verb*; that's an order God is giving

to his prophet! “Comfort ye my people, says your God!” And God says, “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, tell everyone that their time of exile, their time of suffering is *over*. Go up on the high mountain; be a herald of glad tidings. Cry out at the top of your voice, be a herald of good news. Fear not to cry out, ‘Here is our God!’ Because I the Lord God WILL gather my people in my arms, like a shepherd, with tenderness, with care; I will carry you in my bosom, right next to my heart.”

Have any of you here today EVER felt that you needed that comfort from your God?

This is such sweet good news! Why would we ever hesitate to prepare the way of the Lord?! In our personal desert places, in our wastelands ... however high or low, or rugged and rough, no matter how difficult we’ve made the pathway to our true heart, let’s turn that pathway into a highway for our God.

Some of us may have some work to do in opening our heart to God. I invite everyone here to take some time for that work – we have three good weeks left in Advent. In fact, on the coming three Wednesday evenings we have set aside a special prayer & reflection time; so please join us this Wednesday. And then a few days before Christmas, we will also offer, as we usually do, an evening for sacramental Reconciliation. Those aren’t the only things that we’ve put together to assist in preparing our hearts for Christmas – please take a copy of this flier at the table in the back, or check our parish web site.

Because.... Because we know, don’t we – preparing our heart for God’s coming is THE most important preparation for Christmas.

Deacon Denny Duffell
December 3/4, 2011