

St. James' E-pistle

December 13, 2013

Pulpit Notes

Brothers and Sisters:

My Christmas gift from the Episcopal Church this week was the Parochial Report.

If you don't know what that is, I'll tell you. It is an annual report each congregation must make to the national church. There are two primary parts: membership and financial.

The financial part tells what our income is, how much is pledged (and actually received), fundraising, rentals, endowment income - all that sort of thing. The membership part reports who is a member, who is a communicant in good standing, "others who are active," and "Inactive."

Do you know if you are a member of St. James'?

In my book, I figure membership is 90% being there.

But going by the Church's book, you are not a member unless your baptism is recorded in our membership ledger. That means, unless you were baptized here, you could go to church every week and pledge faithfully yet still not technically be a member. To do that, you would have to do one of three things: A) be confirmed here, B) be received into the Episcopal Church (from another denomination in apostolic succession), or C) formally transfer your membership from another Episcopal Church.

So, if you weren't baptized here or haven't done one of those three things, chances are, you're not a member. You would be "others who are active." As a side note, some people feel formal membership is silly and unnecessary, but at least everyone should know what their status is.

Oh, and what about that "Communicants in good standing" status? What does that mean?

Well, just because you're a member doesn't mean you take part in the life of the church. To be considered a communicant in good standing, you have to have "received Holy Communion at least three times during the preceding year" and be "faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented," and be faithful "in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God."

The "inactive" status ought to be fairly self-explanatory.

Why mention this right now, right before Christmas? The way I see it, Advent is a season of self-examination, of preparing ourselves for Christ - I mean really preparing in our hearts.

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Part of that self-examination is looking at who we are and asking what we - what you and I - are willing to commit to.

If you are not sure of your formal status and would like to be, give me a call. We'll look at the books and see. If you are not a formal member and want to stake your claim, we can make that happen! Whether through confirmation, reception or transfer, the membership process is relatively painless.

The difficult part is and always has been in following Christ wherever he leads you.

In Christ,

Chuck+

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The News of the Diocese

The Rev. Allen Shin has been elected as our next bishop suffragan. He will be consecrated on May 17th.

The News of the Church

Christmas Worship

Share your Christmas Joy with others. Invite them to join you in worship.

Christmas Eve:

6:00 PM Family Christmas Service - placing Christ Child in the Creche, children's sermon, and St. James' Orchestra.

10:00 PM Candlelight Christmas Service - Pre-service music starts at 10:00. Liturgy starts at 10:30 with candlelight and choir. A beautiful celebration of the birth of Christ.

Christmas Day:

10:00 AM Simple Christmas Service - If you don't like to go out at night or don't like crowds, this is for you. At the Chapel, it offers gentle, quiet celebration.

Pledges: If you have not yet been able to turn in your pledge for the coming year, it would be very helpful if you could do so in the next few days. The parish needs to obtain your pledge information in order to complete the preparation of its annual budget. Should you have any questions, please contact Junior Warden Andy Hall at: 229-2126.

Cookie Sale: December 14 is the day for the big Candy/Cookie sale in the Parish Hall. All proceeds from this event help us provide the Christmas meals for our 25 families in the community.

Christmas Gift Stars: Please return all presents unwrapped by Friday, December 20th. If you want to help out, but don't want to shop, no problem! We have provided Christmas Outreach envelopes in the pews for the next two Sundays for that purpose.

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Please keep the following people in your prayers:

Janet Arms, Ruth Blanding, John Bohlmann, Kurt Burkhardt, Michael Day, Jane Gagliardoto, Kasey Gaulin, Jack Gordy, Harold Hall, Jolanda Heijenbrok, Brooke Helton, Rev. Don Hoger, Barbara Knakal, Rosemary Leuken, Andrew Mendelson, Rev. Tim Millard, Clifford Plass, Gerald Plass, Deborah Porach, Don Renten, John Robinson, Marty Schroeder, Richard Secor, James Sheeky, Naomi Sleight, Debbie Stone, Gloria Veach, Candace Vincent, Cassidy Way and Cliff Wells. In addition, please pray for the repose of the soul of Roger Dederer.

Schedules

A Note about Schedules: The names you see below are those listed on their respective schedules. There are often times when, due to sickness or travel, substitutes are asked to fill in or trade positions. This will probably NOT be reflected in the lists below—so, if there is an inconsistency between what you see here and what you see on Sunday, that is alright.

Birthdays:	Skye O'Halloran, Sylvia Erlandson and Wayne Gibson
Acolytes:	December 15: Team IV December 22: Team I
Altar Guild:	December 15: Team Number I December 22: Shirley and Pat (8 a.m.); Lynne (10 a.m.)
8 a.m. Readers:	December 15: Angela Henry and Lynne Koch December 22: Debbie Belding and Lucille Ogden
10 a.m. Readers:	December 15: Wilma Tully/Justin Bohlmann December 22: Regina Ardini/Sophie Ciferri
Ushers:	December 15: Kathie Champion and Mary Gabel December 22: Andrew and Tanya Hall
Pledge Clerks:	December 15: Tanya Hall and Anna Marie Pitcher December 22: Paul Littlefield and Dean Caswell
Coffee Hour Hosts:	December 15: Deidre Micker and the Gausepohls December 22: Audrey Horne

This Week's Lectionary

Isaiah 35:1-10
Canticle 15
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

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Sermon Preached on
Second Sunday of Advent
(December 8)

Asps and Vipers

John the Baptist is one of those characters in the bible that everybody knows - and yet we really don't understand him that well. Most people who went to Sunday school can tell you what his clothes were and what he ate, but not what that meant - or what he was preaching.

But this is important.

So, let's start with his clothes: Who knows what he wore? Yup, a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt. What did he eat? Yup, locusts and wild honey.

Why?

His clothes are only described in Matthew and Mark - and we can be pretty sure why Matthew included that description. His entire Gospel is all about making the connection between Jesus and the old testament. He wanted to show that Jesus was a natural continuation - a fulfillment of the Law and prophets.

And that meant that John had to be connected to the old ways as well. That's why you only see one group of people described in the Old Testament as wearing garments of hair - the prophets. And in particular, the greatest prophet of all, Elijah, wore a garment of hair and a belt of leather around his waist.

What's more, the message John proclaims - "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." He's quoting perhaps the next greatest prophet, Isaiah. Matthew wants us to know that what John is doing is nothing new - it is the natural progression of God. And the path he is paving for the Messiah - for Jesus - has been prophesied.

For Matthew's largely Jewish audience, this is important. John is that link between the old and the new. He is a transitional character, neither Old Testament nor New Testament and yet both. If you want a Hudson River analogy, he's neither salt water nor fresh but brackish - kind of like what you'll find in *our* part of the river.

So, with his function to herald in the new while keeping the connection to the old, John does a couple of things. He calls people to repentance and baptizes them.

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Baptism in those days, by the way, was a repeatable ceremony for cleansing oneself of sin - and also a rite for a gentile to become Jewish (in addition to circumcision).

But he treats the Pharisees and Sadducees differently. In Matthew, he calls them a brood of vipers - and may or not then baptize them. Granted, Luke also has John call people a brood of vipers, too, but that's *everyone*. And he gives them specific advice on how to amend their lives. Matthew has him say this *only* to the Pharisees and Sadducees because he does not like them. They are his special bad guys. For him, they alone are John's brood of vipers, and he offers no advice on changing.

Matthew's John has already condemned them.

But in doing so, maybe John is neither fully remembering his ties to the Old nor anticipating the New.

Bear with me on this. But note that to call someone a snake, especially a poisonous snake, has always been a condemnation. And yet, the prophet Isaiah - whom John the Baptist cites - says something in today's reading we need to take note of.

He says, "The nursing child shall play over the hold of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." This is the same passage where he talks about the wolf lying down with the lamb, the calf and the lion together... There is a **hope** here of something that is not condemnation but what we know as reconciliation.

Again, John calls the Pharisees snakes in Matthew because it appears he can't accept reconciliation with them. And yet, that is exactly Isaiah's hope, his dream. The child and asp together.

Last week, I told you that Advent was all about watching and waiting, keeping eyes open to the world around us as well as to the coming Christ. It is all about **preparing** ourselves for the coming Lord, too - which John correctly calls repentance.

But that preparation - that repentance - is wrapped up in reconciliation. We are called to be reconciled with God **and** each other. That's why we wear purple (or blue) in Advent. Not only is it expectation of the birth of Christ, but it is preparing ourselves through repentance and reconciliation. It's a little bit like Lent in that regard.

Our job of preparing ourselves requires that we look AT ourselves. Are we the viper that John condemns? Or are we the asp who will play with the nursing child?

My point with this is that there is wickedness in each of us, but that it is never irredeemable. As long as we walk on the path of Christ, there is **always** hope and expectation of reconciliation.

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This week the world mourns the death of Nelson Mandela. Anyone who knows history knows that he was NOT a pacifist. He used violence in his early struggles against apartheid, and he did not renounce it even when he became president of South Africa. I say this so as not to sugar coat him, which does him no honor. But what he DID do was use the power that came to him in a new way. He used it to seek reconciliation with the very people who had oppressed his land for so long. He sought not vengeance but a South Africa where there could be harmony.

It is not realized, mind you. South Africa is still a dangerous place in many ways. But the hope and the direction that he took DID change things for the better. Mandela, after years of battle, could have cried "vipers" but chose "asps." That is our call in Advent.

In other words Judgment belongs to the one for whom we prepare. Reconciliation - our preparation for the coming Lord - belongs to us. Amen.