

I Draw Near
Luke 3:7-18; Malachi 3:1-4
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
16 December 2012

The crowds have come out into the wilderness. They've left the comfort of their homes and cities and walked along the rocky trails to the Jordan River there to hear the wild, hairy preacher proclaim repentance. A voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

Do they come out of curiosity, for some afternoon entertainment, or because there is a longing, a desire for something more? What do they want this wild man to do for them? What experiences are they expecting? What's their wish?

And John turns to them, "You brood of vipers!" You cannot trust in your heritage or your tradition or the faith of your mothers and fathers. You yourselves must bear fruit worthy of repentance. Yes, you are the children of Abraham, but that means nothing. What have you done? If you haven't born fruit, then you might as well be cast into the fire.

And these seekers who have come desiring something from John now ask their question, "What then should we do?" They ask it three times, "What should we do?"

"In our daily lives things don't go exactly as we had planned, as we had hoped. The car didn't run right this morning. We never seem to have enough time. We could stand to lose some weight, but it is so difficult. You know, we simply aren't as happy as we expected to be. We thought we had done all the things we needed to do to be content and happy, but we just aren't there yet. What then should we do?"

"Some of us thought that if we made just the right amount of money that we would be set. If we didn't have to worry every month about our finances then we'd have time to spend on all the 'good things.' But here we are, the things we've enjoyed and all the work we put in hasn't been enough, we aren't fulfilled. We really yearn for something more in our lives. What should we do?"

"You know, some of us were raised with the idea that we had to get ahead in life. We spent years doing everything that would further our ambitions. Along the way we made decisions and set priorities. If at times we didn't stop to smell the roses, it was because we knew that the people who did that would be left behind. After all, you either "lead, follow, or get out of the way." We've reached our goals, but sometimes we wonder what all of it was for. What did our ambition gain us? What about those people we met along the road, what happened to them? What then should we do?"

Luke tells us in the gospel that all the people were filled with expectation. The one who is coming will be even more powerful than John. That one will winnow the chaff and burn with unquenchable fire. A fire that purifies and refines. It is the fire of the divine Spirit drawing near. Who can endure? Who can stand? What should we do?

This is the fiery Spirit at the heart of life which ignites our desire. It is the glory that evokes our awe and wonder. It is the affirmation of life that leads to human flourishing. It is the power of renewing love.

Wendy Farley writes, "We are light and we long for radiance." For we are children of God, born in the image and likeness of God. God calls to us, igniting the fiery Spirit within us. The 13th century teacher Hadewijch of Antwerp said, "O soul, creature, And noble image, Risk the adventure!"

Risk the adventure and let the divine Spirit burn within us, shaping our wishes and desires. For sin is the opposite of enjoyment and delight. According to theologian Belden Lane, the great Protestant Reformer John Calvin "defined sin on occasion as a matter of 'dullness,' a lack of imaginative insight, a pathetic failure in taking delight."

God, then, lures us away from dullness to enjoyment and imagination. Belden Lane continues, "From this perspective, redemption means being delivered from the banality of sin and summoned to true wildness," which he then defines as "a high-spirited celebration of God's presence in an astonishing world."

God's presence, or the Advent promise of Immanuel, God with us, invokes enjoyment, delight, and imagination and, thereby, saves us from our worst selves.

Remember the story that launched our Advent theme. Young Elliot Mitchell asked his Mom, "What's your wish?" Laura answered, "Purpose, work, and a challenge." Elliot replied, "'Yeah, but what else would you wish for? I mean something like flying or a superpower.'"

Elliot imagined something wonderful and longed for adventure. Laura also longed for adventure and meaning, something beyond the mundane. Though their perspectives differ as child and adult, each was responding to the divine lure, the fiery Spirit of God, which rescues us from dullness and banality and invites us to desire something more.

And so the fiery Spirit works within us, burning the chaff, renewing us in love, shaping our desires and wishes, and giving us a new perspective. For so much of the spiritual life is learning to see in a new way. To see and understand our neighbors and their joys and concerns. To see and understand the troubled systems of the world and respond by trying to improve them. To see and understand how God loves us and is working for us. To see and understand ourselves, who we are, and who we can yet be.

What we wish for this Advent must be more than a mere craving that fulfills some need of our ego. It must be participation in the glorious, powerful, loving work of God. We ask, as those who came to John so long ago also asked, "What, then, should we do?" The theologian Catherine Keller wrote, "Can we hear the voice of the beloved, the divine lure, promiscuously inviting us all, even now, to come, to 'come away'? To become who we did not know we could be?"

For that is what God desires of us. That is what we should do. Use our imagination. Awaken to our deep desire. Become who you did not know you could be.

We are waiting patiently and expectantly for God to draw near, for the Christ to be born, for the Spirit to ignite. In that waiting and longing, God is calling to us. Become your very best. Become who I created you to be. You are my child, my beloved. In you burns the holy fire. Become my glory. Be fully alive.

What's your wish? We have simply to respond.