

Following Directions

Matthew 3:1-12, Isaiah 11:1-10

December 5, 2004

When I was a child Christmas was magical. Christmas was going to bring delights that I could hardly imagine, and it seemed to me that Christmas would never come. Christmas was an event in the far distant future-- months and months away--and to my young mind, months and months seemed like an eternity. Now that I'm an adult, Christmas seems to come all too quickly, with a sure advance and an inevitability that I find daunting. I want Advent to be meaningful; I want to take time to wait for and prepare for Jesus' coming, but I find this difficult, since time seems to be stuck on fast forward. Perhaps you can relate to these feelings.

I'm telling you this because I think there are some ways that my feelings about Christmas are similar to the world's experience of the Kingdom of God (or the kingdom of Heaven as Matthew calls it.) I'll grant that there are major differences. In the first place mine is merely a psychological experience--time doesn't really go faster as I get older--it only seems to. The clock actually ticks along at the same pace. The coming of the Kingdom of God, on the other hand, is an event that is both cosmic and spiritual.

Let's look at the similarities. First, the coming of the Kingdom of God is in the future, just as Christmas was in my childhood future. For Isaiah, and for us, this Kingdom is going to have delights that we can hardly imagine. Justice and righteousness and peace and harmony will be woven together in a colorful tapestry. The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat will be friends. A little child will not only be safe among them, but will lead them.

Second, for us Christians, the Kingdom of God is, not only future, but in another sense, present--immanent. Just as Christmas is just around the corner for me as an adult, for us as Christians, the Kingdom of God is at hand. It's not just that John the Baptist declares it to be, standing there waist deep in the Jordan. Jesus himself begins his ministry with the same words.

I once saw a short play about the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary. As the play began the angel was on a ladder. He explained to Mary that he couldn't touch the earth because it was too evil. Later, after he had talked to her awhile he descended from the ladder and began to walk around.

"But you said you couldn't touch the earth!" She said.

The angel replied, "That was before the Spirit came upon you--before the holy

one was incarnate. Now the kingdom has begun on earth. It is close enough to touch, and everything is different.”

What? This kingdom of justice and righteousness and peace and harmony is nearby--close enough for us to touch and taste? How do we do that?

John gave us directions. John told us pretty clearly what it was we had to do: Repent. He said. Turn around! We don't usually think of repentance as turning around, we think rather of feeling guilty, falling on our knees and saying "I'm sorry," and being forgiven. Picture instead a person hell-bent on getting her own way--having her eyes on the prize, and suddenly turning around, heading in the opposite direction, heaven-bent on doing God's will. When I was about three years old my mother planed a birthday party for me. At it's beginning she gathered all my friends at a certain spot for a picture. She had treats that she was going to give us afterward. But I didn't know about the treats and I was busy playing in a sand pile. I turned my back on Mom and refused to come when she called. So she gave the treats to my friends. Finally, hearing their cries of delight I turned around, I saw what I was missing. I repented. Finally I joined them. That's repentance. And in the few hours or moments that we're able to do that, we're tasting the kingdom of God.

Advent gives us an opportunity to approach the boundary between our world and the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a boundary that we are not always aware of, yet God is on the other side always inviting us to cross over. However you observe Advent, may you heed the invitation to cross the boundary, at least for an occasional moment. May you find the sense of peace and blessing that God holds for you.

Third, the Kingdom of God is becoming. And the miracle is that God is actualizing it and calling us to help in actualizing it. Jesus gave us the directions: "Love your neighbor." he said. The more we are able to turn around and do this, the more the kingdom is realized in our lives, little by little. Then the more God can use us to help make the kingdom a reality in our world. Mother Theresa said, we are trying to make our communities another Nazareth, where Jesus can come and rest awhile. God can use us to try to make our community another Nazareth.

I read a story that I would like to share with you about baptism -- a story about baptism that became a story of repentance-- of turning around -- of changing directions. It is a story of God working in people's hearts to produce genuine change.

It is really the story of two baptisms. In the first instance, a church leader whose daughter had a new baby, approached the pastor to ask him to baptize the baby.

The pastor asked a few questions and determined that the baby's parents lived elsewhere and were not active in any church. He explained baptism to the church leader, and suggested that the parents have the baby baptized in a church in their own town -- a church where they could realistically promise to be active themselves.

The pastor thought he had made his point well, but he discovered later that the church leader had gone behind his back to members of the church board, who voted to support the baptism. The board's decision put great pressure on the pastor, who decided to go ahead with the baptism in spite of his reservations.

That Sunday, when the baby was to be baptized, the pastor asked, "Who stands with this child?" the church leader's family stood, signifying their commitment to raise the child in the Christian faith. It was an inspiring sight to see the whole family pledging their support to the baby.

But then another woman came the pastor. Her daughter was not married but had recently had a baby. Shouldn't her baby be baptized too? The pastor presented the matter to the board, who had some concerns about the mother's commitment. However, they approved the baptism.

On the appropriate Sunday, the new mother nervously brought her baby down the aisle. When it came time for the question, "Who stands with this child?" the pastor nodded to baby's grandmother. She alone would stand in support of this tiny child.

But then, the pastor saw movement out of the corner of his eye. And then he saw the church leader stand -- the one who had forced through the baptism of his grandchild. And then that man's wife stood -- and then another person -- and another and another. And then the whole congregation was standing.

Isn't that a beautiful story! Think about those two baptisms, and consider the church leader's part in each. In the first instance, he wanted something and used power to get it. He got what he wanted. The pastor baptized his grand baby!

In the second instance, that man was moved to the depths as he saw the

vulnerability of the young mother and her baby. He was no longer demanding to get something, but was instead offering to give something. The needs of a helpless baby had produced a kind of repentance -- a change in the direction of his life.

This Advent it is my wish for all of us that we can follow directions and find the kingdom.
Amen.