

2 Peter 3:8-15

⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Mark 1:1-8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Regaining the Joy of Christmas

I love the season of Advent mostly because I hold such wonderful memories of Christmas from my childhood. I wonder exactly when I grew up; I wonder when the wonder of Christmas disappeared for me. Was it when I discovered that Santa Claus was not who I always hoped he would be? When did I lose that innocence? When did the world stop being a magical, beautiful place for me?

We all “grow up.” Beyond the discovery that Santa Claus doesn’t actually visit every child’s home on Christmas Eve, we also learn about wars and about crime and about injustice, disease and suffering and death. The world stops being such a beautiful place – today is the

73rd anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor; I suppose a lot of people “grew up” on that day. Their sense of safety was gone. We learn about the madness and danger going on around us, and our joy is no longer there. We can’t close our eyes to the horrors that occur around us, and we can’t prevent our own children from witnessing those same horrors. At some juncture they will experience a Pearl Harbor, a 911, or some other great tragedy, and that full joy may never return to them, and no present from Santa Claus can ever restore it.

And this is why Advent is so important, why the Christian story rather than the Santa story is so important. Children will learn that Santa is no savior who brings them everlasting life or joy, but Jesus, Jesus on the other hand, brings life eternal and hope eternal and joy eternal; such things cannot be packaged and placed under a tree. Christmas is about the arrival of a savior who doesn’t give us little packages but brings us new life and promises to bring us a new world. Advent is about the hope we have in Jesus’ presence in the Holy Spirit and in the future coming of a new heaven and a new earth, “where righteousness is at home,” as Peter says in today’s epistle lesson, a new earth where children no longer have to experience the disappointment of a world full of violence and injustice – that’s the best Christmas present we could ever imagine.

But Advent is even more than that. It’s not just about the comfort of Jesus’ presence and the coming of his kingdom; it’s about being involved. God has made us a part of the ongoing story. It’s interesting how the Gospel of Mark begins and ends; it starts, as we read today, with the phrase “The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” That was the title that Mark gave to this book. It’s *the beginning*, and he ends his book with an empty tomb, literally *open ended*; with a strange man in a white robe telling the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is in Galilee. In other words, the story doesn’t end. The disciples will presumably go and meet Jesus and follow his instructions. We too, as Christ’s disciples, as Christ’s Church, keep this story going.

It is the duty of the Church to actually *be* the living presence of Christ in this world, and that is nothing to take lightly. It is our full—time gig. God became human in Jesus Christ, not simply to pay us a visit and promise us a happy ending; he has put us in charge of the ending. We are called to transform the entire world. We Christians have become instruments of change. That’s why Christ has to be EVERYTHING to the Christian, because we’re not out to change *part* of the world or part of ourselves, because that leaves the task uncompleted as it has been for the last two thousand years. We can’t compartmentalize life into neat packages like work, leisure, politics, and religion. A Christian understands that everything comes together under Christ, that our lives are fully devoted to Christ, or at least they’re supposed to be. That is our reason for living, pure and simple, and shame on the Church if we ever distort our purpose into anything other than that or sell ourselves as anything less than that. We are agents of Christ, commissioned, all of us, to bear the good news of Jesus Christ to this rather corrupted world. We bring hope by announcing that the violence and injustice will end, and we will see that it does end.

But to start the process we ourselves need to be primed, and that is accomplished first through repentance – both John the Baptist and Jesus set this as a priority; both stressed the need to repent. Why? Because we don't know what we're doing. We look at tragedies like those that occur with Eric Garner, and Christians are all over the board in their perspectives on it. Some demand justice while others claim that justice was served, and both sides insist that they're right. We agree that Eric Garner's death was a tragedy, but we disagree on whose fault it is and on what to do as we move forward; we are all infested with biases and prejudices that we are not even conscious of. That is why the first step to discipleship is repentance, because if we don't acknowledge what is wrong *within* us we'll only end up casting blame on everything *outside of us*. In John's gospel Jesus says, "Unless a person is born from above (or born again) he will never see the kingdom of God. We can't be born from above unless die to what is below, and we can only die to what's below when we truly turn ourselves over to Christ. If we can't even *see* God's kingdom how can we ever find our way there? To be born (again) we have to die to our sins; *that's what repentance is*. It isn't confession; it's heartfelt change that can only happen when we are determined to allow the change to occur, and it doesn't happen in an instant – I went to meeting of pastors and church leaders on Thursday, and each of us shared our feelings on the grand jury decision that came out on Wednesday, and our conclusions varied. What does that tell you when Church leaders can't agree on such issues? It tells me that we all need to repent, that we need to ask God to work within us to help us discern the way forward, because there is one Christ and one Church and there should be only one way forward.

For us to continue the story of Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, we must repent so that we may be "born from above" which means we ourselves have to be transformed into his likeness. And if there is one truth about Jesus that we can all agree upon it's that he lived for others. That's what we as Christians have to do; live for others. Our prejudices and biases are all the products of hearts that are self-centered, interested in protecting ourselves from each other rather than living *for* each other. When we place full faith and trust in Christ, we are freed to live for others, empowered to act for others. We are capable of truly *loving* others.

Today we ask ourselves where we see God in this world and the only hope we have is if God indeed is in US, and his presence is known through OUR ACTIONS. When we accept our role in this process of world transformation we once again experience the true joy of Christmas, the truth that God came to us in a child, that he lived his life for us, and that one day we may all live our lives for one another. There is no greater gift than that.