

Sermon: II Advent, Year C

Texts: Baruch

Luke 3:1-6

Just over twenty years ago, in one dramatic night, the Berlin Wall fell: November 9, 1989. I remember that event with the kind of clarity that comes when your own life is suddenly interrupted. Special reports on television announced breaking news, and, in turn, whatever had been planned for the day was indefinitely delayed. It could wait, because even at the distance of several thousand miles this phenomenon merited our own pausing at length to watch. For we were witnessing history in the making; not, as it so often happens, in the form of tragedy or disaster, but now in an experience of euphoria that was overwhelming decades of oppression, fear, suspicion, and the long, dark shadows cast by the Cold War.

That night, without prompting, crowds of people had converged on the wall. In East Germany, they crossed the barricades that had been designed to stop every possible scheme for escape, and this movement was so irrepressible that the border guards could only stand and stare. On the West side, people quickly gathered to welcome and assist their fellow Germans, so long divided by vying political ideologies.

I remember being transfixed by the vision of their public jubilation. Where before individuals had been cut down by rifle fire and left to die, now, somehow, and seemingly inexorably, they stood triumphant on the top of the wall, reaching out and embracing one another and chipping away at the formerly forbidding cement in order to take home a chunk as a souvenir. It was unbelievable -- a rare moment when governments had no control and policies meant nothing; for a groundswell of quiet rebellion had mysteriously erupted -- voices in the wilderness that could not be silenced. In a matter of hours all of the violence of previous decades was superseded by delirious joy. No one had imagined that the wall could be so peacefully and decisively conquered. And because of this, the world itself seemed different: safer and more hopeful, brighter and less deterministic -- not just in theory but in the vivid dismantling of a barrier that for years had been continually hardened and made more menacing.

The partying in Berlin went on well into the night. And around the globe, millions of people stopped to share that elation, because it was such an enthralling victory of reunion and reconciliation. Euphoria literally means well-being or bearing up well, and for those who simply walked across the border that evening no other emotion could have been more appropriate, which made it rightfully contagious for those of us who watched.

I think that some experience of the very same euphoria should strike us when we hear the account of John the Baptist's preaching in the wilderness -- for when we do so, we become witnesses to a very similar event and a far greater proclamation of freedom. Luke tells us that multitudes of people flocked to see him, walking no small distance out of the city. Why? What was worth such interest and the interruption of the usual course of the day? John's message was clear: God was about to do something dramatic -- something, he said, of this magnitude (and we should strain to envision this as literally as possible) -- the mountains would be made low and the valleys would be exalted. Every barrier was about to be removed; every shadow of a border between God and us was soon to be eliminated. And we would then be able to stroll, unhindered

and unafraid into a place that was previously unimaginable. For there would no longer be any wall left standing, nor any threat or any judgment laid against us. All these things were about to be decisively overwhelmed: not by us or our actions, but by God alone. The crowds converged on John at the Jordan river much like they gathered in Berlin; they wanted to participate in the changing of history, even if it was just by being there to see and to be amazed.

Interestingly, Luke is explicit about the time and the setting. He is not merely offering an uplifting fable from which to take hope. He is telling us that at a very specific point in the course of events, the ways of the world were overturned -- not twenty years ago on evening of November 9, but, just as definitively, in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. The Gospel he is writing, therefore, is not a theory or a collection of ancient religious conjecture or even an exceptional example of inspirational dreaming; it's news -- news about what has happened, told so that in the hearing of it, our lives might be reshaped. It's meant to stop us in our tracks, and if it's really about God, this news merits our attention. John declared that the world would soon be different: it was to become safer and more hopeful, brighter and less deterministic, because Jesus was about to appear. And Jesus would be the incarnate and conclusive assurance (and here I choose my words very carefully) of God's repentance -- God's repentance. For repentance fundamentally means turning around, and Jesus is God's resolute turning around to us in love, God humbling himself and descending, taking on our mortal form in order to break down every wall that divides -- even betrayal and death. It's God's repentance that John preached: God's forgiveness of sins that was coming in Jesus. It's God's repentance matters, of which we are privileged to be witnesses.

This, however, is where we make our most common mistake, thinking that repentance, like just about everything else in life, must really be about us. We tie it to our own sense of guilt and remorse and our own decision, then, to change the form of our own life. And thereby, repentance becomes a duty... to which we give fleeting attention for a season -- like a little taste of therapy -- before we move on to more important matters.

But repentance is not like that at all. What John announced was that it was the very coming of God, mysteriously and powerfully, as God's quiet rebellion, infinitely peaceful and infinitely overwhelming. So more than all else, John the Baptist invites us to be enthralled, not apologetic, a people who can exude the euphoria of the limitless freedom given us in Christ. It's worth our pondering how our worship and Christian life became so staid, so predictable, so dry, when, in essence, if we get things right, others should find themselves transfixed by our shared, public jubilation.

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