

Second Sunday of Advent, Gospel Year A

Amiss But Not Lost

Matthew 3:1-12

Second Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Glenn L. Monson

3 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”[a] 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

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

4 Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 “I baptize you with[b] water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with[c] the Holy Spirit

and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”



DIAGNOSIS: All Is Amiss

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Chaos Abounds

Everywhere we look, we see trouble. People have lost their way. The roads that are present are in poor shape, crooked beyond understanding, and no one seems to be assigned to repair them. It is not only the roads that are crooked, but also those who have been given responsibility to repair them. Meanwhile the farming community has lost its way as well. Trees are bearing rotten fruit, not good fruit. Is there a blight, or an undetected enemy in our midst? We don't know. And worst of all, the leaders of our communities—those with the gifts and the clout to do something about this shoddy state of affairs—are at

ease, resting on their laurels, claiming their privilege, unconcerned about the negligence that is so rampant.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Presumption Abounds

“We have Abraham as our father”—that is the line one hears regularly. “We have our ticket out of this mess, if need be. We have connections. That’s what we trust. We have no need of tending to the degradation of all that God has made; why should we? We are fine. Not bearing fruit, worthy of repentance, you say? Who cares! The only fruit we care about is the fruit that better be on our breakfast table in the morning when we want it. Our daddy Abe will take care of us.”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): An Accounting

It turns out that a day of reckoning has come. The ax, the winnowing fork, and fire have begun to do their work. Trees which bear no fruit are being cut down; chaff which is good for nothing is being thrown out; all that does not lead to Life is being burned away by the righteous fire of the Holy One. We who have trusted in our pedigree, our own performance, or our piety are now left slithering about like vipers before the oncoming fire, seeking an escape. There is none.

PROGNOSIS: All Is Not Lost

S
t
e
p
4
:
I
n
i
t
i
a
l
P
r
o
g
n
o
s
i



s (Eternal Solution): Another Father

It turns out that God is able to raise up children of the promise even from dead stones, even from the dust, even from sinners such as us. It turns out that the Holy Spirit burns away only the dross and all that would lead us away from God. It turns out that Jesus knows a Father who is much greater than Abraham, to whom he turned while on the Cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And because of that petition, and the Cross on which Jesus hung, we are forgiven and freed.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Another Family

The One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire has claimed us in our baptism, and our sins are forgiven. We no longer presume upon God's mercy, but instead strive to live in response to it. Our trust is now in the Faithful One who has adopted us into the family of God. The family of Abraham is no longer the only family to which we belong. We benefit from a new covenant.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Another Kind of Fruit

Our vineyards and fruit trees are now beginning to look a lot more like the pictures in the seed catalogs. Good fruit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc., are being borne in our lives. Wheat, not only chaff, is being gathered, and ground into flour and it feeds the world. The crooked roads and pot holes are being repaired as we seek peace and justice for all. The one calling out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," is being heard, and the way of Christ is becoming the way we live. In many and various ways, we are being renewed, and the world with it.