

Second Sunday of Advent; John the Baptist and clearing a way

Think of the different cries we hear in the wilderness: the cry of the hawk circling the sky, the murmur of the dove in the grass; a battle cry, a cry of grief; the cry of the warrior, the cry of the lost lover. All are in the passion of Advent.

John the Baptist arrives with the cry of the hawk. He is a warrior in battle, the prophet going to Jerusalem. PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, John first cries. MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. (You brood of vipers, we'll hear next week). Make a path through the wilderness. Make a path through the clutter in your hearts.

Both paths need opening in the wilderness of everyday pre-occupations, and in our cluttered hearts. How many of you have cleared a path in the woods? I'm not talking about raking leaves in the backyard. I'm talking about a woods filled with vines, thick with undergrowth, with low lying branches that snap back. Has anyone cleared a path in such a setting? Who has cut a path in such a setting?

Boy scouts here? What tools, gloves, and shoes did you use? It takes a lot to clear a path.

Many of us hosted Thanksgiving. What did it take to prepare the way for Thanksgiving, letters and e-mails, phone calls, who will bring what, who will sit where, on what chairs, setting the table, not to mention cooking and serving; there's lots to preparing the way.

Probably the most difficult path to clear is to someone from whom you are separated by argument, by grudge, by wrongdoing or betrayal- someone you feel has wronged, or underappreciated, or diminished you? It's hard enough to go to that person; it may be even harder to allow that person to come to you.

John the Baptist reminds us: anger is part of love, not the opposite of love. Indifference, apathy, lack of passion, is the opposite of love. Anger means I still care. My passion is present, maybe not transformed by grace, but still present. A couple isn't married until they know how to express anger and allow it to be transformed into caring.

Easier said than done. We can't do it by ourselves. Let me say that again: *We cannot let go of our most deeply held passions by ourselves.* We need the expulsive power of a new affection, the transforming power of a new grace. John the Baptist shows the way. Amidst all his thunder, his angry *and loving* passion,

he eventually says in a quiet voice, "One is coming who greater than I, the thong of whose sandals I am unable to tie." He defers. He becomes quiet. He listens. He gives way to Jesus- that a greater Spirit may come forward- as Jesus gives way to a greater Spirit of which he is a part,

I own a piece of property with a cousin my age. I made an agreement with her son to do work on the place, outdoor work, over the course of a year. He fell short, in my estimation. He did what *he* wanted to do, not what I wanted to do. I began to feel ignored, even taken advantage of. I tried to explain. He didn't get it. I sent charts and memos. He didn't get it. He became more and more annoyed with me. I know I'm right, which angers him even more. Even if I'm not right, I have the power of ownership, which makes him devious, by my judgment. His mother tried to intervene, though I would say, it's hard for her to move beyond defending her son and see MY point of view clearly. The family feud grew.

Time alone was not going to heal it.

We needed a third party. We needed a setting and someone with whom we could sit down, before whom we could talk, be quiet, and listen. a setting where I could let go of some of my own righteousness, and restore right relations. It doesn't help for me to win the argument. Even if I win...WE lose.

This personal story has parallels in social relations, even in international relations. Are we going to fight and overwhelm the enemy on THEIR terms, meeting violence with more violence? How do we use our force and force is necessary, you can't cave in to a bully, how do we use our position and force to isolate the terror, rather than obliterate a whole people? I don't know.

At the time of the prayers today, we will share a litany that our bishop composed this week. It's a beginning, a way for us to be attentive and alert. Watch out for false prophets. Don't give in to demagogues. They play upon our fear. Be alert. Hold fast. Open the way as we prayed in the song of Zachariah - "that the dawn from on high will break upon us/ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death/ to guide our feet into the way of peace."