

ADVENT 2, Dec. 9, 2018, Year C

- I have recently been re-reading the Napoleonic seafaring novels of Patrick O'Brian.¹ You may remember the Russel Crowe movie, *Master and Commander*, which was based on them. A frequent theme in these books concerns the flow of the tide, and how *the tide waits for no one*. Because we *don't control* the tide, it behooves us to *live in accord* with it. Where waters are *tidal*, sea levels rise and fall every day. An *incoming tide* is a *rising* tide, and an *outgoing tide* is *falling* one. Back in the days of sailing ships, a vessel heading for the high seas would float out on a *falling* tide, carrying the ship with it. *On the other hand*, a returning ship, when *entering* a harbor, would be carried in on a *rising* tide.
- This example of tides provides *a metaphor for phases in the life of a church*. At Grace, we have been experiencing a time of *significant change*. With churches, *change* can be measured in *different* ways ~ like in *the number of members*, the *average attendance*, or by donor *giving levels*. *Other things are harder to measure*, like *spiritual growth*. *Consistent with* the patterns of nature, we have experienced the equivalent of *both* rising *and* falling tides. *And like the patterns of nature*, they involve *factors beyond our control*.
- For example, in recent years our *membership* and *attendance* numbers have been *level* or *have decreased*. At the same time, *our financial giving has gone up*, and the *spiritual health of our congregation has grown*. Looking at these variables *in relation to the metaphor of tides*, *we are presented with a choice about which occupies our attention*. *We could see ourselves* experiencing something like a *falling* tide, carrying us away from a comfortable past. *But, we can also* perceive ourselves as *being lifted by a rising tide*, carrying us *in* to a *promising new* port of call.
- *Advent provides a helpful reference point* for these choices, and for our reflection *on where we are* as a parish. *Advent* means that something is *arriving, appearing* or *emerging*. For with Advent, a *new* church year *arrives*.

We hear *Gospel-beginning narratives* about the *appearing* of John the Baptizer. And we hear *about* the Son of Man *coming* at the end of time, *and* his *revealing* of the fullness of God's Kingdom. In every Gospel, John the Baptizer plays a key role in the *arrival* of God's *long-awaited* glory. *Given these positive Advent themes, we can associate this season of promise with a rising, or incoming tide. We are, as it were, flowing in to a harbor of hope.*

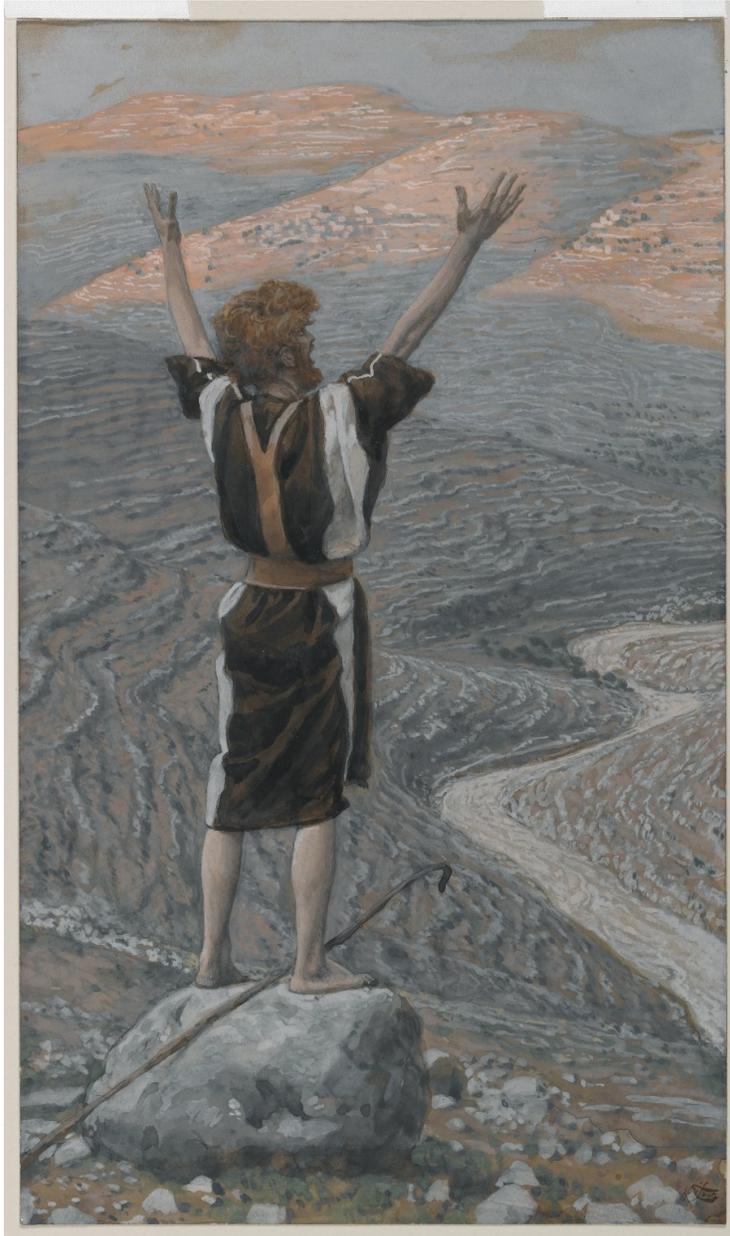
- DeWitt Jones teaches that the times of *greatest change* are also the times of *greatest opportunity*.² And so, *we have a choice* about how we *see* things. For change *can* mean a *gain, just as much as it can mean a loss*. So, *do we focus on the change that is from something in the past?* Or do we focus *on the change that is to something ahead?* In other words, do we see ourselves *riding* a *receding* tide, measured by *a decrease in* membership and attendance? *Or*, do we see ourselves being lifted by an *incoming* tide, measured by *rising giving and spiritual growth*? These are *our most important* questions.
- As we consider them, let's remember *a key principle* we learn from *Appreciative Inquiry*. *That upon which we focus our attention tends to grow*. And so, *which* of these two tidal directions *captures our attention* ~ a *falling* one *or* a *rising* one? *Each perspective tells us a different story*. The perspective we *choose* affects *where* we believe we are going, and *how* we think we're getting there.
- *The themes of Advent*, expressed in our lectionary Bible readings, and in our liturgy, fit well here. They *have to do with God's promises and with God's Providence*. Throughout history, by our decisions, choices and endeavors, human actors have certainly shaped events. But Scripture teaches us that *the principal hand guiding human history is that of God ~ through God's involvement in, and the Spirit's shaping of, all that happens*. And so, God's Spirit doesn't *leave us to look after ourselves*, to craft the pattern for our

lives. Instead, God calls us to *look for*, and *attend to*, the Spirit's leading – which is *always present*. We are *then* helped and strengthened *to do* what God wants, and *to flourish with it*.

- On the middle two Sundays of every Advent, we hear about the life and ministry of John the Baptizer. To borrow and adapt a phrase,³ John *stands athwart history*, and shouts *both "stop," as well as "go."* *Stop* ~ stop *from* the false choice of living apart from God's *revealed* will for us. And *go* ~ go *into* a life of responsiveness to the Spirit's leading.
- One of my favorite *New Yorker* cartoons may help here. Two men stand at the entrance to Hell. One says to the other, "well, my motto has *always* been, '*go with the flow*.' Only, I *didn't* know the flow ended up *here*!" Exactly! *For responsiveness to the Spirit's leading is something other than 'going with the flow.'* Sometimes, perhaps *even often*, it means choosing to *stop going with the flow*, precisely so that we can hear and respond to what God has *already* revealed and shared with us.
- *And so, of the two tidal directions* we have identified, *which direction might better represent how God is leading our faith community? It is surely the second, and positive one.* Rather than our *drifting out* on a *falling* tide, I believe that *God is leading us into a new future, carrying us on a rising tide.*
- Let's explore the solid basis we have for this hope. Luke tells us that John the Baptizer "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming *a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" The baptism that John proclaimed was one of *repentance*, which means *a turning back*, or *a turning away from* something or some things. *Supposing* that we hear these words *as applying to us, from what –then– are we being called to turn away, or from what* are we to *turn back*? *Left to ourselves*, we may be unsure about how best to answer. But John the Baptizer *does not leave us to ourselves.*

Instead, *John points us back to God's promises*, and especially to those we hear *in the prophet Isaiah*.

- What God promises *through Isaiah is a sure way forward*. The *way forward* is one where "the crooked is made straight, and the rough ways are made smooth." For this is "*the way of the Lord*," or "*the way*" on which we voyage or journey *when we follow the Lord*. *Turning back*, in this way, therefore, *also leads us forward*. And, we are most sure of *moving forward by the Spirit's guidance, when we return to the Lord's revealed will*. Prayerful discernment will help us discover what this means *in practice*. And, *as a parish, we are entering into a prayerful process of shared spiritual discernment about all this*.
- Baruch encourages us, with words that echo Isaiah, in *this* way: "*Take off* the garment of your sorrow ... *O [people of Grace], and put on* forever the beauty of the glory from God. *Put on* the... righteousness that comes from God;... *for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.*"⁴
- And so, we can take personal strength from Baruch's promises. He tells us how "*God has ordered that* every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low, and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, *so [his people] may walk safely in the glory of God... For God will lead [the people of Grace] with joy, in the light of his glory*, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him."



James Tissot, *The Voice in the Desert*

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Notes:

¹ Here is a link to the Amazon listing for the first volume: https://smile.amazon.com/Master-Commander-Patrick-OBrian/dp/0393307050/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1544147547&sr=8-2

² See, for example, his video, *Celebrate What's Right With the World*, among his other creative materials, more information about which, and a sample video about which, can be accessed here:

³ The quote is adapted from words attributed to William F. Buckley, Jr., a recognized "conservative" thinker. Yet, standing "*athwart history*" is a posture that may be adopted equally by those who see their vocation as serving progressive causes as much as by those who perceive the opposite. John the Baptizer's ministry obviously had political implications, but we can not neatly or readily say how they might fit into our contemporary categories of thought.

⁴ The words quoted here are from Baruch 5:1-9, included in the Revised Common Lectionary readings for the Sunday, Advent 2, Year C. They may be viewed by following this link: http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Advent/CAdv2_RCL.html