

THE MESSAGE for Dec 5, 2010

Advent 2

Matthew 3:1-12

Justice

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Our topic this morning is “Justice.” Check out this picture of Roxana Cortez on the screen. Roxana lives in El Salvador and was sponsored in 2002 by Jan and Keith Dubois as part of our “Sponsor a Student in El Salvador” outreach ministry. Jan took this picture during her first trip to El Salvador 2002.



Jan shared with me that Roxana was 18 years old in this picture and only in the fifth grade. “Why?” You might ask. Why would a fifth grader be 18 years old? Roxana was a victim of El Salvador's civil war in the 1990's. Her family was on the run, hiding in the mountains, hiding from the military that was going around murdering peasants they believed to be revolting. The peasants were simply striving to better their lives. 70,000 peasants were killed in that civil war ending with little changing for them or their lifestyle.

Many people converted to Lutheranism during and after that war. The Catholic Church turned away from the plight of the peasants, siding with the government. Sadly, so too did our United States government, supplying arms, fearing that the peasants were a communist faction.

The civil war left the country deforested, weary, and financially broken. The peasants returned to their homes only to find them gone or no longer habitable. The government gave the homeless land on which to rebuild. And communities were formed. Nueva Esperanza-New Hope-is one such community. Our Lutheran church and school are the only institutions many residents trust.

Shortly after this picture was taken, Roxana dropped out of school. She withdrew to care for her ailing mother. Her bond with her mother surpasses her own personal ambition. Roxana's mother was a guerilla fighter in the civil war and squatted in a stream to deliver Roxana, while on the run from the soldiers. With no food, no baby formula, Roxana's mother chewed leaves from a tree and passed the saliva from her mouth to Roxana's to keep her alive. She's small in stature due to poor nutrition as a child, but she has a big heart.

The children we support today in Nueva Esperanza are no longer direct survivors of the civil war. However, the country continues to struggle with poverty, unstable government, constant threats of volcano and hurricane damage. Our Lutheran church and school depends on generous and gracious people like us here at Friedens. Pastor Lupe' (who visited here a year ago in November 2009) allots each family \$15 a month - per

student - for uniforms, books, and supplies. Roxana longs for a world that is different than the one in which she lives.

Jan Dubois, please stand-up. If you would like to learn more about this ministry speak with Jan or if you would like to “Sponsor a Student in El Salvador” with a financial gift, please mark so on your envelope.

Not only do people in El Salvador long for a different world in which we live so too do people right here in our area. Tammy Koller shared with me, our Angel Tree ministry offers support during the Christmas season to single parent families (usually mothers) who are struggling – living on minimum wage – barely able to make ends meet. These families have children in our Luthercare childcare programs in Lebanon and Lancaster Counties. Although the children are enrolled at a lower rate, many of these parents are having trouble paying for these services so they can work.

Once again this year we are making Gift Cards available for these families so that they too might have a Merry Christmas. Last year we gave 50 gift cards and touched 50 families. This year perhaps we can reach 75 families. Check out the Angel Tree display in the Fellowship Hall, if you would like to learn more about this ministry or support it financially. Or speak with Tammy Koller – Tammy, please stand-up. This is a powerful ministry right here in our midst. These families long for a world that is different from the one in which we live.

The Bible has an unrelenting message to anyone who longs for a world that is better than the one in which we live. The Bible points to this one fact – God has an undying love for you and me and all peoples. Last week we learned that God’s love sent Jesus into the world as the greatest gift ever. Jesus came to bring peace and justice in the lives of all. Jesus shows us God’s love. And the Bible calls us to live by faith in Jesus, making our faith effective through our love for one another (see Galatians 5:6).

Our reading from Matthew for today speaks about a different world, a better world, a world that is lived through repentance and a life-giving relationship with Jesus. Listen to Matthew’s Gospel chapter 3 verses 1-12...

John the Baptist is speaking to a hopeless situation. He is speaking to people who long for a world that is better than the one in which they live. Here’s the setting. For nearly 100 years, the Roman Empire controlled everything. The people were oppressed and taxed, pushed around and held down by one of the world’s greatest powers. Who could stand up to Rome? People cried out for peace and justice. Notice that into this hopeless situation John proclaims a word of hope saying: *the Kingdom of heaven has come near!*

John announces that God’s promise to send a King to rule with righteousness, to set people free, to usher in a whole new world of peace and justice and has arrived in Jesus.

God is up to something new. I don't know if you know it or not, or noticed it or not, but God is always up to something new, creating a whole new reality in which we live, where peace and justice reign. John the Baptist knew this and lived this. He calls one and all to live it too; to repent, to align our lives with God's movement in the world.

To repent, as we know, means to change one's mind, to see things differently, to change the way we live our lives. To repent means that people reorient any part of their lives that isn't moving in harmony with God's movement in the world. *Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.*

How does John's message speak to us here today?

- We long for a better world.
- We long for a world in which no one is hungry or homeless.
- We long for a world in which everyone has equal access to education, and employment, and healthcare.
- We long for a world in which families are supported and can support one another.
- We long for a world in which we feel safe without needing to spend so much on military hardware or the cost of human lives for freedom.
- We long for a world in which our streets and neighborhoods and homes are safe.

We are people of faith. And our faith is made effective through our love for one another. It takes faith to believe that God really is at work in this world, making things right, even when we don't see it. It takes faith to believe that Jesus is king and his kingdom is a reality in our midst, right here and right now. It takes faith to believe that the Holy Spirit really is breathing new life into the dead places in our lives and our world, even when we don't experience it.

Do you believe? Do you believe that God is calling us to do more than just believe? God is calling us to repent. God is calling us to change our minds, to change the way we see things, to change the way we live our lives.

Why? Why repent? Because of God's undying love for us in Christ Jesus. And because of God's undying love I dare you to do more than just believe!

- Dare to believe that God is calling us to participate in something new.
- Dare to believe that we are not powerless or victims of our circumstances.
- Dare to believe that blaming others for our situation never helps.
- Dare to believe that we are servants in God's Kingdom work on earth.
- Dare to believe that we can make a difference in the world – a world filled with people who long for a different world than what we are currently experiencing.

Every year about this time we set-up a Crèche in our house (we have a couple of them) with a wooden stable and Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus in the manger, the animals and the shepherds and the wise men standing off to the side. It's a beautiful scene. Our children enjoy playing with the figurines and rearrange them. We encourage them to be careful and to play nicely.

One morning Simon was rearranging the figurines but Thea, his sister, got up first and took baby Jesus out of the manger to play with him in the other room. Simon wanted Jesus. He wanted to put him back in the manger. Thea wanted to play with Jesus. And keep him out of the manger. Let's just say a heated discussion ensued. With me being the most discussed. I stopped in midsentence and sensed a great sermon illustration in the making. Here it is...

I said to both of them "we need to share Jesus with one another. And not fight over him." And believe it or not they said, "Okay, we will." And they did! They started sharing Jesus with one another. It dawned on me right then and there – that with Jesus there is no need to fight over him or to keep him for ourselves or to leave him in the manger. We are to share Jesus with one another.

How might we do that this year? How might we take him from the manger and share him with others? How can we make our faith effective through our love for the people around us?

John the Baptist says it begins with repentance. So... what do we need to repent of in order to share Jesus with others?

Here are three possibilities:

First: perhaps we need to repent of our consumerism. Getting more stuff will never make us happy. In a world where the wealthiest 20% of the global population consumes 80% of its resources – there's room for repentance. When 30,000 children die from starvation and preventable disease every day – there is room for repentance.

Repenting of our consumerism is not easy, especially during this time of year, but what better time to begin? I wasn't going to share this but I think I will.

Yesterday, instead of going to the office where I told my wife I was going, I went to look at a Mustang... a 1965 Mustang... all original. Ohhhhh man... It's true! I'm driving over – it's about 20 minutes from here – I'm driving over feeling as guilty as you know what. And I'm looking at this car – you know how it is... You start having this conversation in your head when you see something you want. "Well - it's only \$1200. I have that." You know - "I have two kids, when they grow up, I would have two Mustangs I could give them each one." "It would be a great project with Simon for a father son bonding time." You know, we have those conversations with ourselves. (Looking at Amber) I won't buy it honey. I promise! It's a good thing the guy wasn't there because well... you know how it is...

We have room for repentance when it comes to our consumerism

Second: perhaps we need to repent of self-centeredness. Me too or I wouldn't have gone to look at that Mustang in the first place.

We are wooed into thinking the world revolves around us – that our personal wants, and needs, and preferences are more important. That we can have what we want our way, any way we want it, any time we want it – bolognie! Self-centeredness is a cultural epidemic that is killing us. It's so common a dis-ease that we often don't even realize that we are infected by it. St. Paul wrote:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Philippians 2)

How might we live more fully by these words every day? There is room for us to repent of our self-centeredness.

Third: perhaps we need to repent of our prejudices. The negative attitudes and the judgments we make about others is never a good thing. We are called to love God and love our neighbor, not love God and judge our neighbor.

President Bill Clinton once wrote:

“The divide of race has been America's constant curse. Each new wave of immigrants gives us new targets to old prejudices. Prejudice and contempt, cloaked in the pretense of religious or political conviction, are no different. They have nearly destroyed us in the past. They plague us still. They fuel the fanaticism of terror. They torment the lives of millions in fractured nations around the world. These obsessions cripple both those who are hated and, of course, those who hate, robbing both of what they might become.”

What prejudices do we need to repent of?

I leave you with one final question. We long for a world that is different than the one in we are currently living in. So... what are we going to do about it? Amen.