

Changing Direction
Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12
December 9, 2007

There is a certain woman in the Midwest who takes a kind of pious pride in having a Christmas tree decorated with ornaments that are symbols of the first Christmas and the Christian faith – angels, shepherds, mangers, stars, camels, sheep, donkeys, wise men, hearts, doves – even a rooster crowing out the good news. You will not find on this woman's Christmas tree any Nutcracker soldiers, Santa Clauses, holly wreaths, cute little mice, gingerbread houses, cowboy hats, bells, gnomes or jeweled orbs that hang on most people's trees.

One year the woman's best friend came for dinner and she was surprised, as they looked at the tree, to find there a chimney sweep—a small, wooden figure all in black, complete with top hat and carrying a brush and a ladder. The friend asked, "Why a chimney sweep? How is it a religious symbol of Christmas?"

The woman replied, "Well, it seems to me that the message of Christmas issues a clear call to us to sweep the clutter and grime out of our spirits. We need to clean out the soot of leftover fires of the past, so we are ready for the burning issues of the present."ⁱ

She is right, for that is exactly the message we hear from John the Baptizer every Advent season. John might be a kin to the chimney sweep, for John comes preaching repentance, telling us to change our lives. John calls us to look at the soot and ashes that discolor our inner lives, those things like selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, jealousy, self-pity and hatred. For if those kinds of things are clogging our inner lives, there won't be room for Christ to come in all his fullness.

John makes it clear, however, that the baptism of water that he offers is mild in comparison to the baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit that Jesus offers. Water baptism is simply the beginning of the process of change. John's mild cleansing is followed by Jesus' purifying fire within that really cleans house. The fire that Jesus lights within not only disinfects harmful germs, but that fire also ignites us, empowers us, sets us ablaze with energy, enthusiasm, and faith. That's what we're ultimately waiting for this Advent season: for the fire of faith to be kindled or rekindled within. But oftentimes the fire of faith is extinguished by leftover soot and ashes of the past.

The season of Advent waiting is a time for sweeping our lives free of internal clutter. If we are to experience the deepest meaning of God's love miracle, we must become vulnerable, honest, and humbly confess those things that separate us from God, from others, and from our best selves. We can't

experience God's love in Christ until we are ready to receive. Repentance is an act of clearing the clutter from our lives and making room for Christ to reside.

It is hard for us to hear John's call to change. It's a humbling experience to confess that we're not perfect or that we've been wrong. It's humiliating to admit our character flaws and inappropriate behavior. It's embarrassing to acknowledge our sour attitudes and less than kindly thoughts. But if we own up to the fact that all is not well within, we are well on our way to new life. Honestly stating our reality opens the door for God to come in and make us new. Acknowledging that we aren't who we want to be or who God wants us to be is the beginning of being made new.

Such confession of our need to grow is not a once in a lifetime experience. If we truly desire to grow into the likeness of Christ, such self-examination needs to be a regular, even daily, event. Self-examination has been a vital part of the Christian tradition for centuries. There are a variety of forms that it might take. Perhaps the most useful in our daily lives is to ask ourselves two questions at the end of the day:

Where did I experience God's presence today?

Where did I fail to respond to God today?

I often try to end my days by asking myself those questions. I take a few minutes to review my day and to reflect on ways in which God was revealed to me. Then I examine my own response to God, both those times in which I said "Yes" to God and those moments in which I said "No" to God. It is often a humbling experience, but it is one that assists me in growing into greater maturity as a Christian.

Last week as I was rummaging through some boxes of Christmas decorations, I happened upon a brass angel that had been given to me several years ago. Over the years it had become tarnished, its shine and brilliance dulled by time. I found some polish and began the work of restoring the angel's glow. Soon the brass shined once again, the dullness wiped away leaving a bright and sparkling angel. As I watched the hidden beauty re-emerge, I thought I was seeing in miniature what happened to us when we truly acknowledge the tarnish and soot that stains our lives. Just as the angel had become tarnished and dusty through neglect, so too our attitudes, relationships, and behavior become tarnished with neglect and abuse. During our Advent waiting, God calls us to bring out the polish, to cleanse the tarnish and allow our lives to shine with new meaning and brilliance. For God sees far beneath the tarnish and dust, the dirt and clutter. With the eyes of love, God sees us as we were made to be, and out of the soot and ashes, God calls forth the angel within.

Having swept our chimney of soot and ashes, then it's time to kindle the fire within to allow Christ to be born anew in our lives. That's when our lives

really begin to change. That's when we are made new. That's when our spirits become green and blossom. John the Baptizer knew. In John's gospel, he says, "I must decrease, and he must increase." That verse is one that I seek to be a goal in my life: to be emptied of myself, my own selfish desires, my own agendas, so that I might become full of Christ. It is a lifelong journey and a daily task to allow Christ to reign within. We become better persons when we allow Christ to light that fire within and to be the source of our life and living.

The need to cleanse our lives of clutter applies not simply to our individual lives, but also to our communal life. We need to be rid of those forces which drag people down and prevent them from experiencing the fullness of their potential. Breakdowns in human relationships and family lives contribute to great pain that often is expressed in dangerous cyclical forms, continuing to wreak havoc on other lives. Our consumer culture puts more emphasis on the happiness quotient found in material things which can never provide the emotional support and stability that makes life meaningful. Our social infrastructures are not able to address the multitude of ills causing dis-ease in our society. Corporately we have much to repent and to change. Priorities need to be evaluated. Our resources need to be invested in that which enhances the quality of life.

One cold day at the police court in New York they brought before Fiorello La Guardia a trembling old man, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. His family, he said, was starving.

"I've got to punish you," declared La Guardia. "The law makes no exception. I can do nothing but sentence you to a fine of \$10 dollars." But La Guardia was reaching into his pocket as he added, "Well, here's the \$10 dollars to pay your fine. And now I remit the fine." He tossed a \$10 dollar bill into his hat.

"Furthermore," he declared, "I'm going to fine everybody in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to this defendant!" The hat was passed, and a shocked old man left the courtroom with a stake of \$47.50.ⁱⁱ

Jesus comes to restore the shine to our dull, dismal lives. He comes to help us create new attitudes, behaviors, and relationships to replace the old. God desires to call forth the shining angels which lie hidden deep within each of us. God wants to replace our brokenness with wholeness. We can rise up out of our tarnished, lackluster condition to brightness and brilliance. We will be able to sing with Scrooge in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* as he celebrates his conversion: "I will begin again! I will live my life! I will make sure my story ends on a note of truth, on a strong Amen. And I'll thank my stars and remember when I was able to begin again."

The hope of this Advent season is that we can begin again. We can change direction. Attitudes can be replaced; behavior modified; relationships restored.

We need not be stuck in a rut, addicted to the same old routine. We can break loose from the chains that bind us and dance with new life. We can arise from the graves that entomb us and leap with laughter and joy. We can break away from the things that imprison us and glide into the future with angel's wings. Christ comes to the deep, dark corners of our lives and our world and makes his light shine bright.

ⁱ Rev. Don Shelby.

ⁱⁱ Bennett Cerf, *Book of Laughs*.

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