

**“The Joy of Disappointment”
The Rev. James S. Ward**

December 9, 2007

We at St. Stephen’s have begun this season of Advent well, reflecting last Sunday and the Sunday before on the power and significance of silence and solitude. But it’s easy in the rush and pressure of this season to mistake these disciplines of attention and prayer for their diabolical impostors: secrecy and alienation.

Anyone who lives in a family—and we all must, however we might sometimes regret our own—anyone who lives in a family encounters secrecy. We are loathe to disclose openly our grief, the foibles, diagnoses, and sometimes even the crimes and brutalities that can be a part of any family. We prefer to forget them, to relegate them to the confines of the therapeutic couch or to the distant and blurred memories of a repressed childhood, long-forgotten.

Christmas can become a very difficult time for us because those memories, hurts or disappointments, can powerfully shape the way we approach the season with its gatherings, greetings and family obligations. All the background chatter and the messages about joy and childlike wonder can disrupt even the most well protected of us. It can throw us into despair, a depression that, however it may be related to neuro-chemistry or the disappearance of sunlight, can further complicate the way the season demands of us that we experience something profoundly, transformatively joyful.

This is especially true within the context of our families. Whether our own childhood experience of Christmas with our family was painful enough that we don’t want to remember it, let alone somehow repeat it with our own children, or it was so rich with warmth, tenderness and wonder, so much so that we want to share it with our children, what is clear is how powerfully driven we can be by our own memories of family Christmases. I suppose in some ways that’s a good thing because our economy depends on us being driven to spend at this time of year; to spend out of our need to show those closest to us how much we love them. But our own secret hurts and disappointments, even family betrayals, remain unexamined, unconscious, in the words of the Gospel lesson and collect for today, un-repented.

And so these unacknowledged, “un-repented,” hurts can continue to betray us. They can cause us to relive our experience. We can find ourselves in the same familiar place yet again, after thinking we had long since sworn it off, taken the cure, and done everything possible to avoid it. Or out of that very desperation not to repeat it yet again, we can find ourselves terrified to discover it arising in our children or their children. Is it any wonder that instead of solitude, we can so often experience being alone as “alienation.” Even in crowds or at parties we can taste the isolation, the exclusion, that can throw us back to our own family experience. Often our religion, our very religious keeping of the season, is part of an elaborate ritualized management of our memories, expectations, and disappointments. We touch them a little, like a kind of homeopathic offering, just enough to keep their great power, the wild and dangerous force of them at a safe distance.

Into this scene comes One who wants to speak to us. We think to listen to us, because we have so much to tell, so much heart ache to unburden ourselves of, so many ways in which we

have not been listened to or loved enough. But the voice comes to awaken us! It calls to liberate us from the very self-protective self-consumption, the “imagination of our own hearts,” into which we are so easily thrown at this season.

The preaching of John awakens Jerusalem and all the surrounding region to their hopes for fulfillment, all that “the Kingdom of heaven come near” can mean for those who come out to him in the desert for baptism. “The hopes and fears of all the years,” are projected onto this bizarre figure shouting warnings and curses in the wilderness. Just so, our own desires for fulfillment are lifted up every year by this season. The wonderful image that Elaine held up for us last week of the powers of the Middle East sitting around a table seeking Peace in Annapolis, MD, seems every bit as bizarre, “a voice crying in the wilderness.”

But what John announced in words, Jesus inhabits with his life. And by the time Jesus comes it’s as if all the anger, violence, and retribution have been pruned from the message that John proclaimed. So different is this fulfillment from the judgment he predicted—so unrecognizable is it—that the prophet sinks into a depression himself, as we will see next week. Coming out of the desert, calling Israel to enter the Land through the Jordan, wearing the clothes of Elijah, John puts God’s plan of salvation on the line. Everything depends on the One who is coming after him, “the root of Jesse a signal to the nations.” His disappointment is our clue. It’s only by finding hope in the face of disappointment that our desires are fulfilled.

That, after all, is the message of the resurrection: it was not what we expected. It was salvation by surprise, judgment by reversal. The career of Jesus was a disappointment. He didn’t “fix” things as we thought he should have. Whether in the world around us or in ourselves, it is not threats, power, or control that can solve the fear and the anxiety that afflicts us. All John’s judgments and accusations in the name of God and of the “coming One,” however they may accord with religious tradition, serve only to set us up for disappointment, and to give aid and comfort to the purveyors of secrecy, alienation, and violence. But our disappointment is turned to joy by forgiveness, by the vulnerable greeting of “Peace” from the very one whom we have hurt, who is the One who is to come. Beneath the “peace on earth and glory in the highest” blasted out by the angel chorus, it is this quiet voice that assures us that we are beloved in spite of the panic and fear that normally grip us. It is that voice of love and forgiveness that surprises us in our disappointment, that speaks in the silence when we are able to turn toward the secrets and the alienation we usually run from.

The change to which John calls us doesn’t come from our own attempts at holiness or goodness, our own intentions to structure or control our lives or families to be happier or more joyful. All these efforts at self improvement are doomed to the kind of failure that John’s own project ends in. Fixing our families or our children, fixing ourselves, is beyond our power. Our efforts, beguiling and tempting as they always are, shoring up our sense of earnest rectitude, only fuel reaction, resentment and anxiety. They are, in the evocative words of the collect, the sins we are to “forsake,” like illicit lovers. But when we find ourselves exposed, in chagrin and disappointment, yet calm enough to surrender to the love and forgiveness of God in silence and solitude, then we are able to begin to receive the gift of the wholeness that is to come, filled with the joy and peace that can only come from God.