

Sermon Advent 3 2021

Recently we heard the judgement from two trials. Three men were found guilty of the murder of Ahmaud Aubery. A week earlier Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of the murders of two men and of shooting a third. Our legal system is in place to make judgement in these and similar happenings. You may not like one or other of these verdicts but in each case, there was a jury deciding the result. But you probably make or pass many judgements in the course of life; some with major impacts on your life or that of a family member. I learned this week of a wonderful man who made the decision not to have chemo treatment for pancreatic cancer; understanding by avoiding chemo he would not be debilitated by chemo in the final months of life, even though he understood there would be no chemo to attack the cancer cells. (I understand of course that choosing chemo is the recommended option for many cancer diagnoses) In fact he continued well enough to keep working (even at 83!) and keep family life going for a whole year.

Judgment touches many areas of life. Do you find yourself sometimes saying, “Did I really do that?” or “Stupid me!” or words to that effect. I know I do, and I realize I have become increasingly more critical and shorter with myself, quicker to negatively judge myself as I get older and obviously less competent. However, I tell myself, “It’s the way it is,” when I am being kinder!

The good news of course is that God told you, through the prophet Zephaniah that God has forgiven the judgments God has against you. God has forgiven those moments when you have said or done something hastily which you later regretted. But your repentance has a large part to play in this.

Judgement is also a major part of our Gospel today. John the Baptist lambasted those who came to hear him speak and then come forward to be baptized. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come” does not sound very welcoming, does it? He went to tell them to, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance. He also had a message for each group who came to him. He told each group of people what they needed to do to amend their lives. He had a judgement for each and a solution or remedy.

Have you ever asked yourself, “What would John the Baptist have said to me?” How do you imagine he would have redirected your life? Can you imagine him standing in front of you as though with a big stick and scolding you, reorienting you? Even without his threatening presence you can answer the question, “What needs changing in my life? Can you make your own judgement upon yourself?

What about our nation? How does it or should it make changes? Last fall and winter 10 of us undertook to follow a series of ten classes in a series entitled “Sacred Ground.” It dealt with our nation and our heritage; each class member was asked to reflect on his or her own story of life in the US. We learned a lot about our nation’s shocking story too. This week I read this article about it in “Christian Century” and thought it appropriate to share it with you today.

I live in the United States of America, a modern-day empire that has gained riches at the expense of others. Here is an abbreviated litany of our greedy and deadly forays: We had a penchant for squatting on and stealing Native American land and then exterminating Native American peoples because they became a problem to get rid of when they refused to cede their land and assimilate. The North and the South alike can trace much of their wealth to chattel slavery and the commercial industries surrounding it. Warring with Mexico paved the way for us to continue our westward expansion.

Even after the Civil War, our country did not learn its lessons. The United States abolished slavery and gave African American men voting rights. But by 1877, we'd had our fill of Reconstruction and began to renege on its promises. Some historians say that African Americans only really gained their freedom—the freedom they were granted in 1865—with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Yet even now we are rolling back voting rights.

If we turn our gaze to how our nation treated other nonWhites, we see our sordid history of exploiting workers and then deporting or imprisoning them. Think of the Chinese we recruited to come build the railroads and then summarily barred from entering our country from 1882 to 1943. In 1917 we passed an immigration law that barred people in much of Asia from entering the United States. We did not want southern and Eastern Europeans coming in either, so a literacy test was added to the new law.

And let's not forget the Japanese American citizens we herded into concentration camps after Pearl Harbor. After that we continued massive deportations of those we invited to work here, exploited the poor here and elsewhere, oppressed minorities, and propped up dictators in South America who allowed us to extract the riches of countries less powerful than our own. We still commit many of these same injustices. I have always wondered how a country supposedly founded on Christian principles could act so un-Christian. What we fail to remember is that repenting of our sins is distinctly Christian.

Of course, repentance is more than just facing ourselves and saying, "I am sorry." That's a start. But producing fruit in keeping with repentance, as John compels us to do, means making amends. With the Holy Spirit's help, it means refusing to continue down destructive, death-filled, and toxic paths. It means choosing life in all its vulnerability, fragility, and glory—life in Christ. Such a life is a full life (John 10:10). Repentance in all its forms brings us life, healing, shalom. When we confess our sins to one another and pray for one another, we will be healed (James 5:16).

Neither you, nor I, nor our nation can produce fruit in keeping with repentance unless we take the first step in telling the truth about ourselves. Only then can we make amends, change, and embrace shalom. If we need help in knowing what it means to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, I suggest reviewing the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. These show us clearly what John the Baptist was getting at: how to produce fruit in keeping with repentance — and thereby return to the selves and nation God has intended us to be. I wonder what it would look like for our national and institutional structures to repent?

Scary. Challenging, isn't it when presented as a story for you to digest. But if you go back to John the Baptist you can reflect on his insistence that you produce fruit worthy of repentance. Telling the truth is the first step, but thereafter you have to remember daily your role in making a difference in your life, the lives of those closest to you and others beyond that circle.

I share a little story about a family a few days before Christmas. The father was busy with bills and paperwork, the mother was busy with lists and then was busy in the kitchen. Their little daughter wanting to chat and play was a nuisance so in the end they packed her off to bed with a quick , "Good night." As she said her prayers, including the Lord's Prayer she found herself changing one line to, "Forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us." Are you so busy with your paperwork and lists and kitchen duties or whatever keeps you from giving time an dloe to those around you? Does your imposed busyness make you into the sort of person who no one would wish to be around? If so then you can begin there to consider how you could, ahould change your Christmas to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

So as we move into the second half of Advent, think about how you are preparing for God's incarnation once more. I suggest you reflect on the meaning of "Emmanuel" – God with us. God is coming to be with you, with you at Christmas and with you forever of course. And then I invite you to remember "For God so loved the world he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him **may** not perish but may have eternal life." Amen

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