

Sunday, December 7
Advent II, Year A
The Rev. Jack Alvey

Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus

We live in a world obsessed with outward appearances, with creature comforts, and with the idea of control. At this time of year, these obsessions show themselves most vividly. And while I'm up for a little holiday revelry and appreciate exterior illumination, and love the tradition of gift giving, I have to remind myself that these things aren't the true light.

As one hymn reminds us, turning our eyes upon Jesus makes the things of this world grow strangely dim. At best, the things of this world give us temporary peace and comfort. At worst, they take our eyes off what truly gives life – which is a peace that is not of this world – the peace of Christ. Beneath all the artificial lights, sumptuous feasting, and Christmas presents, we carry a deeper hunger — not for more things, but for truth. For God. For something this world cannot satisfy us with no matter how hard we try.

Today's Gospel shows this hunger in a place most of us would call barren — in the wilderness. Notice where people go to have this hunger named. A place that is hot and dry, lacking resources. Where locusts dipped in honey is considered a feast. And yet people from Jerusalem and all of Judea flock there. Why? Because they are hungry for something real — hungry for the truth about themselves, about this world, and about God. There is no sugar coating the truth in the wilderness — no worldly comforts to protect us. Just the raw material of life and faith – a place where God can finally get through to us. This wilderness backdrop sets the stage for the main character of the Advent season: John the Baptist. As a friend of mine in Selma says, he comes to “preach the good news to the bad people.” No sermon hook is needed — his fashion and his diet are enough to grab the crowd's attention.

There are no formalities, no niceties. Instead of “Dearly beloved,” he hisses, “You brood of vipers!” His message is brutally honest. He basically says, “Look, your chaff is showing!” If you're a city boy like me, you might not know what chaff is and might confuse it with a weed and reduce this lesson to who is in and who is out. The chaff is a part of the plant. It is the husk covering wheat, protecting it from weather and disease. At harvest, the chaff must be removed for the wheat to be gathered and eaten. So, you can see John isn't talking about who belongs and who doesn't. This image reminds us that the line between good and evil isn't drawn between us and them but is drawn down the middle of us all. Keeping that image in mind, we can begin to wonder: what might the chaff represent in our own lives?

The chaff is the parts of us that cling to worldly comforts, the need to look good, the desire for control. The chaff keeps us feeling safe and important, but it must be removed before

we can bear the fruit worthy of repentance. Recognizing our chaff requires honesty — a willingness to see ourselves as we truly are, to take a hard look in the mirror. This brutal honesty is what John calls for in the wilderness when he shouts, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” Despite what the world around you is trying to communicate, the liturgical season of Advent is not, for the most part, a warm and cozy season. The first three Sundays of Advent, in particular, invite us to look honestly at ourselves in preparation for the coming of Christ. And repentance is what this preparation looks like.

In our culture, even in our church, “repent” often feels like a bad word. But without all the heavy baggage, repentance simply means to change your mind, to turn your heart toward God, to notice where you fall short, and to open yourself to God’s transforming work. Episcopal lay theologian Verna Dozier reminds us: “Jesus preached repentance, but the church settled for moralism.” What is moralism? Moralism is a religion that focuses on our goodness — on self-improvement, on following rules, on keeping up with appearances, and performance. On the surface, this doesn’t sound so bad. But moralism is superficial. Its main focus is on the self – good or bad. Moralism can turn us inward on ourselves, and outward in judgment toward others.

In the end, moralism builds a life where love is conditional. Repentance, by contrast, focuses on God’s goodness. It trusts God to transform our hearts — to make us into the people we cannot become on our own, compassionate, humble, and mindful of the needs of others. Trust in God’s goodness produces a life where love is unconditional, a life where we seek to do good for others despite, and even because of, their imperfections. Too often, our world — and even the church — encourages moralism over true repentance. Moralism trains us to measure ourselves against others, to maintain appearances, to cling to control. And when we notice our shortcomings, when we realize we are not in control, we are terrified. We are frightened because we live in an often-unforgiving world, because we are afraid of being judged by the same standard we judge others and even ourselves.

Most of us have learned to hide our shortcomings — not because we’re deceitful, but because we’re afraid. So instead of turning to God, we’re tempted to cover up our shortcomings with more chaff, more pretense, more polishing of our image. And this covering up is exhausting, because what we truly long for is simply to drop the pose, to surrender, and to rest in God. This human mode of self-justification is evident in Jesus’ teaching about the fig tree. From a distance, the fig tree looks healthy. It has leaves. But if you take a closer look, the tree bears no fruit. A tree that looks healthy but bears no fruit is not fulfilling its purpose. Like the fruitless fig tree, a life focused on appearances neglects the love God calls us to – The Word of God means to fertilize the conditions of our lives so that Christ’s transforming love may take root in us, nourishing us bear fruit worthy of repentance.

John points to this transforming love with the image of the Holy Spirit and fire. At first, this image can sound scary, even full of judgment. But the wind and fire of God’s Spirit are not about punishment. They are meant to refine us, clear away the chaff, and prepare us to live

lives that truly reflect God's love. God's judgment, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, is not about condemnation but about love. He says, "Nothing can be more cruel than the leniency which abandons others to their sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe reprimand which calls another Christian back from the path of sin." Advent reminds us that this Spirit, this refining love, is coming. The Truth we long for — Christ himself — draws near to remove what hinders our growth and fill our hunger for the life God gives us in Christ.

And that fruit matters for the salvation of the world. A salvation that produces the fruit of generosity, compassion, and service that leads to healing for us and for the world. Remembering the hymn I used earlier, "Keep your eyes upon Jesus, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim." When our eyes are on Christ, the distractions, the appearances, the control we cling to lose their power, and our hunger for the Truth finds fulfillment in Christ. This Advent: Don't be embarrassed that your chaff is showing. God doesn't want to shame you. God wants to heal you with his goodness and love. A goodness and love that refines and purifies so that what holds you back can be removed. And your life may then bear the kind of fruit that restores and nourishes — not only the world inside you but also the world around you, a world hungry to be filled with the truth of God in Christ. Amen.