

Christ Episcopal Church  
 Dayton, Ohio  
 Advent 2C  
 December 6, 2009

It is a Season of Contrasts: The picture of stores filled with shoppers and goods, long Christmas wish lists, evergreen trees supported by mounds of presents, daily reports on the economy . . . more homeless and unemployed than ever . . . burning logs in the fireplaces and ever colder temperatures. Contrasts.

There's Scrooge . . . wealthy and eminently unhappy set over against Bob Cratchett and his family – living in poverty. I have a friend in Maine who gathers friends and family together each year at 3 o'clock on the afternoon of the Fourth Sunday of Advent to read to them the story of Scrooge. It's a family tradition that goes back several generations. And who better to tell of these contrasts than Charles Dickens in his story, *A Christmas Carol*.

Consider the Christmas story itself: We have the image of Herod, King and potentate, contrasted with poor Joseph and his family for whom there is no room in the inn. Wise men, kings from afar, and poor shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night.

African contrasts: About six years ago a mission team from Christ Church went to Nyaberra, Kenya . . . they took a large number of pencils, only to discover that they were useless; because neither the students nor their school could afford paper. In many classes there was one book . . . the school library was only an empty shell of a room. They observed that no one had glasses. Look around this morning and see how many people are wearing glasses. What are the odds that an entire school filled with students and teachers had such healthy eyes that not one needed glasses?

Think of Sierra Leone: The powerful pictures of the young girls, stubs for arms, pregnant from rape . . . with no physical way to cuddle or care for the babies that they subsequently bore. Contrast them with the photos of diamond studded celebrities and beautiful people in New York, London, Paris, Monaco. Diamonds only recently washed in the blood of those same young Sierra Leonian girls.

Russian contrasts: Often we've been privileged to hear some of our young people recollect their trips to Sablino.. They've spoken of the contrasts between their own comfortable, well-to-do lives, and the spiritual wealth of their poor Russian counterparts. And their eyes have been opened.

Christina was from Poland—a Lutheran pastor. In the early 1980's, she escaped with husband and child, sneaking over the border into Germany in the dark of night. They landed in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where people in our congregation took them in to help them settle in the US. Christina spoke English fairly well and, to all outward appearances, she adapted fairly well. But she eventually returned to Poland with her son,

leaving her husband here. She returned to Poland to face possible sanctions from the then Communist government, for having escaped.

Why did she leave the land of the free and the home of the brave to return to a land of repression and scarcity and totalitarianism? Choice! Christina was used to going to market every morning to stand in line for hours. When the market finally opened, one day they would have bread or potatoes, another day some sort of beef, some days they'd have one and only one brand of toilet paper. Can you imagine what it might have been like for Christina to enter into a typical American Supermarket? Joy? Far from it! Christina was overwhelmed. How could she ever choose among dozens of brands of this or that? Chicken breasts, chicken legs, whole chickens? And every kind and cut of beef and pork and fish and shellfish. And that's not to mention White Cloud and Charmin and Seventh Generation – plain, quilted, scented, two-ply? The cultural dissonance was too much to bear, so Christina went home.

I'm thinking of contrasts today. I'm thinking of mountains versus valleys, crooked places opposed to straight ones, rough versus smooth. I'm thinking of the contrasts between plenty and scarcity, between no choices and so many choices that we can't decide. The Scripture says that every mountain shall be made low and every valley shall be filled in. All those contrasts in life, those things that separate us and pull us apart—that destroy us—they disappear in the kingdom of God. Gay and straight, white and black, rich and poor, right and left—all those things that we believe are important, are only dust in the eyes of God.

Advent is a time for Christian people to slow down, to tune out the noise of the season and to pause to consider the contrasts—the mountains of choices and the valleys of despair.

St. Luke tells us that John the Baptist . . . “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” quoting words of the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

When I hear the word “repent,” I envision John the Baptist, clothed in camel's hair, wild-eyed, standing on the banks of the Jordan, fresh from the desert, “Repent!”—or a tall, puritan, Jonathan Edwards, long bony finger pointing with menace, as he preaches his famous sermon, titled, “Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God.” “Repent!”

For many of us “repent” means feeling really, really, bad—guilty, horrible, original sinners that we are.

But Marcus Borg says that

“ . . . the biblical meaning of *repent* is not primarily contrition, but resolve. In the Hebrew Bible, to repent means primarily to return to God. Its metaphorical home is the exile. To repent means to return from exile, to reconnect with God, to walk the way in the wilderness that leads from Babylon to God.<sup>1</sup>

The Prophet Isaiah who spoke of the leveled mountains and filled valleys was speaking about God’s people going home—no barriers preventing their return. We, too, live in exile . . . often feeling so distant from God. With lives so busy, with so many choices, and with the contrasts so great between what we imagine God’s will to be and what we see in our world . . . even the possibility of faith seems remote. Our exile is more mental and emotional than it is physical. Too many of us dwell in that land of despair.

And so it is that we hear John the Baptist’s invitation to repentance as an invitation to return—to have a new mind and new spirit—where the way home is straight and easy—for it’s none other than the way of Jesus. Oh, we may not be able to ascribe to all the church’s doctrine and affirm the creedal formulas at all times without fingers crossed. But the invitation to walk in the way of Jesus is to resolve to walk in Jesus’ path of humble, self-giving love and care for the welfare of others. To do that is to dwell, at the very least, on the outskirts of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 180