

Change agent (Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11)

November 28, 2006

Paul's letter to the Philippians puts me in mind of the annual ritual of Christmas letters and how much I enjoy receiving them, though I have to admit that sometimes the correspondence can veer off into the stratosphere of braggadocio. You know the type:

Dear friends:

It has been a wonderful year for all of us. Our youngest grandchild graduated magna cum laude from kindergarten. Our daughter received the Nobel Prize in Physics in October two weeks after giving birth to triplets. As for ourselves, we are blessed with perfect health, flat abdomens and wrinkle-free complexion. We enjoyed our private audience with the pope in the spring . . .

The occasional excess notwithstanding, it is good to receive the reassurance that the bonds of friendship and shared experience hold fast across time and space. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus." Paul takes no credit, neither does he give credit to his friends for what has already been accomplished. Apparently, modesty on the part of human beings is entirely in order.

There was certainly nothing modest about the message that John the Baptist delivered as he traveled the banks of the River Jordan proclaiming "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his path straight.'" The man had a vision that just wouldn't quit. God will lift up the valleys and bring the mountains low, and you are hereby notified that you have roadwork to do in order to prepare the way and receive the blessing of the new in the world and in your life. But regardless of the grandeur of the vision, John did not focus on himself. He pointed beyond himself and looked expectantly toward what God would surely do.

Luke wanted people to hear this message: a different future was possible, and it was time to get ready to receive it. George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." John the Baptist preached a different message: those who cannot imagine a different future will be condemned to be prisoners of the present. What releases the power of transformation is the spiritual discipline of repentance.

John's call to repentance contrasts sharply with Paul's reassurance that God doesn't need our help to bring about our redemption, but no matter which voice we listen to, the conclusion is that on our own we have no cause to boast.

Even the way Luke tells the story of John the Baptist is intended to put the puffed-up, powerful people of the day in their proper places. He wants to make clear that the important people are not really as important as they and everyone else think they are. "In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee," and Annas and Caiaphas were presiding as the principal priests, a drama began to unfold in which the lives of ordinary people would become ablaze with the light of God's love. The locus of power would shift from the palace to the manger, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Off the screen of the rich, powerful and prominent, in an out-of-the-way place, something important and new was about to happen. John the Baptist had received word of it and felt compelled to share it, because it was too earthshaking for him to keep to himself.

Episcopal priest and educator John Westerhoff puts the message of John the Baptist in the language of contemporary parlance:

I invite you to ponder the possibility of receiving a telephone call from someone you have never met face to face, but because of the stories you have heard about him, you feel that you know him quite well. Over the years, you have confessed your love for him. You have offered prayers in his name. Today, he has called to say that he is on the way. Imagine what he is bringing with him. He is bringing every single thing you need to continue your journey into the dominion of God. His name is Jesus, but before he can come, preparations must be made.

John's job was to name what needs to be done so that Jesus can enter into the life of the world and our own lives. The word John uses is "repentance," which in Greek

means “to change.” Change is not possible, of course, if you think you are just swell the way you are, but with a little humility and a lot of help from the Holy Spirit, change is entirely possible. It is possible for self-absorbed people to cease thinking of themselves as the center of the universe and begin to center their lives in God. It is possible to love God and neighbor more and worry about yourself less. To repent is to turn and look in the direction from which salvation comes and to do the work necessary to receive it when it comes.

Repentance begins with the acknowledgment of the need to change, which then needs to be followed by a willful act of imagination. Imagine that through the grace of God, the completion of a whole new you is possible by the time “the day of Jesus Christ,” as Paul called it, comes at last.

“Heads up!” John the Baptist cries. Your Redeemer is, even now, drawing near.