

“John, Yesterday and Today”
A Homily by Stephen Martz for the People of St. Nicholas
14 December 2008
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 + Luke 1:46-55 + 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 +
John 1:6-8, 19-28

Two weeks ago, I asked you to think about the prophet Isaiah and the season of Advent against the backdrop of our dark economic times. Advent is the great season of darkness, for it is in darkness – sometimes the rich, fertile darkness, other times a darkness that feels fitful, even fright-filled – it is in darkness that longing and hope begin to form.

In the hecticcy – I know it’s not a word, but it should be – of the past two weeks, I have in my spare moments begun to read an amazing, if terrifying book by Jane Mayer entitled, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals*.

Inevitably, then, as I ask you today to think about Advent and another prophet of the season, John the Baptist, I do so deeply mindful of the dark betrayal of our national ideals by public servants who make Governor Bleep appear a rank amateur.

I invite you to ponder three points this morning. The first is: how do we respond to the dark side? Mayer’s book makes clear the Bush Administration made a fateful decision that the dark forces of terror must be met with an equally dark determination. In order to win the war on terror, said Vice President Dick Cheney, “We’ve got to spend time in the shadows.”

Although there was considerable disagreement in the American political and military establishment, those who disagree with the vice president were cut out of the process as decisions were made and executed in secret by a tight group of individuals primarily in the Vice President Cheney’s office.

Their reaction was sharp, but futile. “The rule of law be damned,” is how an FBI counterterrorism official described the Administration’s approach. Meanwhile, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell said of its main architect, the Vice-President’s chief of staff, “He doesn’t believe in the Constitution.”

The terrain Mayer describes is a familiar one to American movie-goers. Her title, *The Dark Side*, plays on the familiar theme of the *Star Wars* movies, while a more recent film, *The Good Shepherd*, based on the life of an American Cold War intelligence official, covers the same moral ground.

The problem is not merely the Bush Administration whose nefarious doings will be undone by the advent of the great President Obama. Would that life were so simple. What we must ponder, and face within ourselves, is the human tendency to meet darkness with darkness, for this possibility resides in our hearts as surely as it does in the hearts of Anakin Skywalker or Dick Cheney.

Note well that the prophets, even when they speak forcefully of God’s justice being visited upon the unrepentant, invariably remain humble and hopeful. Thus John today speaks of *the one who is coming after me* and says, *I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal*.

There’s a second theme or point I’d like you to ponder: the theme of seeing. I’m sure nearly all of you remember the wonderful biblical scene where Mary, pregnant with Jesus, journeys to greet Elizabeth, pregnant with John, and John leaps in the womb with joy at the arrival of Jesus. Later, when Jesus comes to the river where John is baptizing, John recognizes him instantly.

Still later, when John is in prison, he sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is indeed the Messiah. All of these stories are concerned with seeing or recognizing and the last one suggests that when we are in the midst of adversity, our ability to see may diminish.

Mayer describes the reaction of a Marine uniformed lawyer to the Bush Administration's inability to see clearly: "The administration didn't know anything about military law or the laws of war," said Major Dan Mori. "I think they were clueless that there was even a UCMJ and a Manual for Courts-Martial! A military commission can only try violations of the laws of war. But the administration's lawyers didn't understand this...It's inept, incompetent, and improper."

While we can and ought to be outraged at the turpitude practiced on our behalf, the invitation of Advent is to reflect first upon our own capacity to lose our moral bearings. When is it that you or I find our ability to see diminished? And how, like John, can we increase our ability to recognize Christ in ourselves and in the other?

A third and final point. Many of us at one time or another have heard a homily or sermon about John as a wild man. Think hair shirt, locusts, wild honey. Some of us might even 'fess up to having preached one...or more.

John is Christianity's token wild man – make that wild person. Though we may give it an annual nod on the Third Sunday of Advent, wildness is seldom a virtue in our fairly tame and domesticated brand of Christian faith. Too bad.

Many in the men's movement of a few years back sought to reclaim wildness. The poet Robert Bly uses one of the Grimms' fairy tales, "Iron John," to portray the importance of men building a relationship with the Wild Man. Much of what he says cuts across gender. It's a great tale in which a wild man at the bottom of a pond keeps killing everyone and everything that comes near.

The Wild Man embodies qualities which a merely ethical Christianity minimizes or denigrates. Bly says wildness is "about something wet, dark, and low – what James Hillman would call 'soul.'" Elsewhere, he identifies the wild with "exuberance," and with "irrationality, intuition, emotion, the bodily and primitive life."

One cannot read even a chapter or two of Mayer's book without seeing in the men gathered around Vice President Cheney the opposite of the Wild Man. I was struck especially by their narrowness, lack of curiosity, and surplus of certainty. We often see similar qualities in church leaders. The representatives of institutional religion frequently are men caught in a one-sided, senex (old man) kind of energy; distrustful of emotion, instinct, wetness, and the below.

Matt Damon captures this life-stance masterfully in his portrayal of *The Good Shepherd's* Edward Wilson. He's tight, constricted, single-minded, buttoned-up and buttoned-down. No diet of locusts and wild honey for him – though he'd not hesitate to send an operative on a mission with no other diet. If you saw the movie, you will remember the devastating impact of his character flaws on his family.

One of the best questions we can ask this Advent, then, is: am I wild enough?

Our time, like the time of John and Jesus, is one of considerable darkness. John responds to darkness with simplicity and straightforwardness, calling upon those who hear him to repent and be baptized.

In John's response lies an important Advent lesson. Rather than immediately speaking from our own prophetic and forceful voices, we do well in times of darkness to look first at ourselves, to repent. When we fail to do this, we may find ourselves on the dark side and the Messiah for whom we long, when he comes, may come to save others -- from us.