

Advent 2A

December 5, 2010

Matthew 3:1-12

**...but it's Holy Spirit fire**

My name is Jim.

I am from Wisconsin.

I'm sorry.

I am not sorry that I was born in Wisconsin, but, for some reason, because I am from Wisconsin I am quick to apologize ... for anything ... for everything.

It's the way I talk, part of how I speak and relate to people, the way of my mom and her dad before her ... both from Wisconsin, too ... which is why I figure apology must be part and parcel of regional culture.

I'm sorry.

While I am confessing, I might as well share that I have discovered two things about this little quirk.

1) There is always the danger it is just a quirk, a habit of speech. I'm sorry, but I don't mean it.

2) Because no one knows if I'm truly sorry, they just dismiss it and go on. I say, "I'm sorry." You say, "It's alright."

Now, it is true that most of the times I say I am sorry it is merely an idiosyncrasy, but underneath it all, deep down at heart, the quirk expresses a deep, deep truth. I truly am sorry for the way things are.

Things rarely, if ever turn out as I planned or intended them and, from what I can see around me, the same is true for most people. And if it's true for us here -- where, really, things are pretty good -- well, then think of the people around the world who suffer daily from war, violence, disease, hunger, extreme poverty; contemplate the unimaginable cruelty so pervasive on this planet. It's not alright with our lives, our relationships, our society, our world.

I'm sorry and it's not alright.

That's sin. Or rather, the fruits of our sin — the stain enmeshed into every fiber of our existence. Sin.

Priest, professor and author Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that we usually have two reactions to our sin.

1) We excuse it ... It's alright ... or understanding the seriousness of matter ...

2) We punish it ... go to hell.

I think she's onto something. That's usually the reaction to an apology.

It's okay. Or ... it's not okay and someone needs to pay.

But neither response offers much help.

It's one of our big problems of justice (In Connecticut this week — a death sent.) sure, the criminal is sentenced to death, but it doesn't bring the victims back. It simply adds to the body count.

In our state we have been quick to introduce legislation to punish bullies ... but those laws can only do so much. Sure, the bully is fined or even jailed, but the real damage is done and the law just adds to the pain and deepens the rift between people.

True righteous justice would be able to heal and reconcile both, right? We need

the sin removed ... permanently.

When John appears in the wilderness, announcing the near approach of God's Kingdom, he howls and calls God's people to turn around, to change their lives so that how they live is in tune with God's rule. "Live as if God is in charge."

John wades out into the current at the place where Israel crossed over into the promise of God's deliverance, planted his feet firmly and stood up tall fast against the Jordan's rushing current. And he invites all of Israel to follow him into the water and back into God's promises, to step into that water is to say ... I'm sorry and it's not alright

But do they -- do we -- mean it?

When he sees the pious elites and political power brokers coming out, John wonders how those, so wrapped up in the old ways, could possibly mean it when the said ... I'm sorry. How could they possibly truly desire such painful change? Are they truly sorry, or just another of the serpent's deceptions.

That's the problem ... we can't tell. Ours is a world of hopelessly mixed motives. Yet, as much as John knows this message and baptism are from God, he is still God's prophet and sensitive enough to know that the water, the river, the repentance ... can only clean so much.

No matter how much we confess, wash in the water and start again, we cannot make everything alright -- not in ourselves, not in our society, not in our world or on our planet. For every good intention there seems to be an opposite but unequal consequence. At the end of the day, the morning clean is sullied. The planet still groans. People still go to war where they kill and get killed. The rich are still rich, the poor are still poor, the hungry are still starving ... and so on. We still live in a broken world from which no one gets out alive.

And I'm sorry, but it's still not alright.

John is God's prophet. John knows some clean takes fire. Not our fires, not wildfires set by a careless match, not fires set to destroy villages or incinerate cities or hide the evidence ... Not the fires set to punish, but the refiners fire used to make gold pure ... the farmers fire set for the sake of the orchard, or to use up the empty husks

John's great prophetic gift is hope. In holy hope John looks beyond himself and the limits of his own reformation program to see God doing what only God can do: change the very nature of things, to see the hope of the promise that God will yet set things straight. God is coming to establish God's kingdom to put things right, to establish justice and peace and righteousness and security for God's people and healing and wholeness for the creation.

It's in hope that John sees God's axe to the roots, sees the Christ comes with winnowing fork in his hand. It's hope that for once the fruit is gathered, preserved, distributed with equity; and the fruitless branches, burned so health and vitality flourish. The wheat is gathered to feed the world with the bread of life; but the empty husks are burned. It's hope that the world is set straight. Sin is removed and destroyed.

A future is opened beyond sin and confession. A true and lasting absolution is given.

It's not a punishment John sees. It's our salvation.

It's not the fires of hell John sees — those are the fires we set ourselves.

John sees very creative force God, the fire that makes all things new. It's fire,

yes. I'm sorry ... but it's Holy Spirit fire. And for God's people and this world ... it's our only hope.

The hope of Advent is the blue-hot flame of God doing what only God can do: Take away the sin and gives eternal life. Remove the guilt and restore the relationship. Bring back the victim and redeem the criminal. It's as impossible for us to comprehend as Isaiah's vegan lions ... until we see God at work in Jesus who died to take away our sin and rose that we might live real, abundant life in God's kingdom. It's impossible for us to accomplish as it would be to accomplish a reconciliation between wolf and sheep, child and venomous snake until we see that God poured out the fire of his spirit on all nations and all people, making us all children of God not by water alone, but by water and the very word of God.

The fire that actually changes us and changes the way things are ... and that baptism is just the beginning. Imagine what else God will yet do.

My name is Jim.

I am from Wisconsin.

I'm sorry ... but I don't want to be sorry any more. I want everything to be alright,

And it will be ... when Jesus comes. Amen.