Sunday, December 7, 1980
JOHN THE BAPTIST AND US (No. 1 in a Series)
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-11

Advent is the season of preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas. Traditionally the season of Advent is made up of the four Sundays and four weeks before Christmas. Thus, today is the second Sunday in Advent. Advent means “the time is drawing near,” “the arrival,” “the coming near,” “the approach.”

Most of the Bible readings suggested for Advent include the stories of John the Baptist because he is one who prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah. Before we see how his life and message help us prepare for the coming of Christ to us in our time, let’s look first at his background.

John the Baptist’s father was Zechariah, and his mother Elizabeth Zechariah was a priest assigned to the temple in Jerusalem. Elizabeth was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. John was an only child and was born when his parents were thought to be beyond child-bearing age. They had resigned themselves to the fact that they would never have children.

One day when Zechariah was serving his regular shift in the temple and it was his job to burn the incense, he had a vision. In the vision he was told that his prayers had been heard and that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son and that he should be named John. The vision also informed Zechariah that his son would be the preparer of the way for the Messiah. “He will make a people ready for their Lord.”

Zechariah found it difficult to believe. His wife was too old to have a child. However, the messenger in the vision assured him that it would happen just as he predicted, and he further told Zechariah that because he doubted God’s word, he would not be able to speak another word until the child was born.

It happened as predicted. When the child was born, the power of speech returned to Zechariah. Early on it was obvious that John was a deeply religious person and would be an outspoken prophet. He knew that he had a special mission in life — that of being one who prepares the way — a forerunner. Thus, the central point of his preaching was — “be prepared, get ready, God is coming in a new way. Repent, change your ways! Be baptized as a sign of your turning your life around.”

And to the people of his time who prided themselves on not having to make any changes in their lives because they believed that simply being part of the chosen people was enough, John the Baptist had some very pointed words — “Bear fruit that befits repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves,” We have Abraham as our father. “Go and do something to show that you are really changed.” It’s not enough to say, “we belong to the church, or we have a very religious background and come from a long line of religious people.”

In other words, having a religious heritage is fine but there comes a time when we have to claim that heritage as our own and practice it in our lives. We cannot live forever on the faith of our ancestors. We need to have our own faith and practice. Nor is it enough just to live on the pride of our own background.

Some people will say, “I don’t have to worry, I come from the John Doe family.” or “I’m white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.” or “I’m an Irishman,” or a German, or a Russian, or an American, or an African, or a Methodist, or a Roman Catholic, or Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim, or a descendent of the people who came over on the Mayflower, or a daughter of the American Revolution, or I’ve been a member of this congregation for a long time.

Pride in one’s heritage is one thing, but thinking that therefore automatically, we are something special, or that God is particularly on our side is a misunderstanding of our heritage. Thus, John the Baptist warned the people of his own time and nation — “It is not enough merely to say, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants.'”

Many years ago, a play appeared on the Broadway stage which dealt with the declining fortunes of the English aristocracy after World War II. It was a comedy and its plot revolved largely around a young nobleman’s rebellion against his blue-blooded family.

In one scene the defiant son tells his parents what he thinks of them and their way of life and does so in dramatic terms. “You are,” he says, “parasites and exploiters. You fatten on the flesh of the toiling masses and drink the sweat of other’s brows. I am resolved to have nothing further to do with you. From this moment on consider me dead. You no longer have a son.”

His father, a patient man, has taken this quietly. But at length he breaks in upon the son to pose a question. “That’s all very well, but how do you propose to live?”

At this point, the young fellow squares his meager shoulders, thrusts out an unimpressive chin and replies, “I sha11 have to learn to get by on my allowance.”

The people in John the Baptist’s time had been living on the spiritual allowance of their ancestors for some time, but they needed more than that. According to John, it’s not enough mere1y to be able to say, “We come from a long line of very religious and faithful people. We have our spiritual allowance which still comes to us.”

It’s not enough for any of us or for a church or for a nation. For over two centuries the United States has been living on a spiritual allowance from a religious tradition and now that allowance may be running out because we have not made it our own.

The men and women who founded this nation represented a wide variety of political social and economic views. And their attitudes toward institutional religion were to say the least, equally diverse. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of them viewed the world and human existence in what can fairly be called a Biblical perspective. Even though our ancestors came from many different countries and many different expressions of the Christian and Jewish faith, they had some common assumptions about God and about morality which were taken for granted, and our social order was based upon them.

The framers of our constitution assumed that the wellsprings of piety which provided the moral authority for government in their own time would continue to flow ad infinitum. Like the young nobleman who felt that he could sever all ties with his family and still receive an allowance, generations of American have believed that they could neglect or even undermine the theological bases for our national life together, and at the same time count upon these common assumptions to guide and inspire public policy.

But if the reservoir of spiritual energy which has in the past served the nation is not replenished, then politics will begin to fabricate its own spirituality and that would be too bad.

So also, many people who come from a Christian background have felt that they could neglect the cultivation of their own faith and continue to live on the allowance from the past. But John the Baptist reminds us that saying we are “Abraham’s children” is not enough, saying that we come from a religious heritage is not enough. Christ has to be reborn in us in a fresh way.

Thus, celebrating Christmas is not enough — the celebration itself speaks of our heritage and of the fact that we are also children of Abraham and followers of Christ — but the message of John the Baptist is that we go beyond the mere rehearsal of our heritage and make the faith our own.

And when we make Christ our own, amazing things begin to happen. We begin to see all the world in a new way. All human beings become our brothers and sisters. We see the creation as being good and life has a joy that it never had before. We see the wonder of God’s love trans-lated into human love.

Then we begin to turn away from our self-centeredness and we begin to live in a new harmony with other people. God takes over and does what we cannot do, and the broken pieces of life are put together again.

This Advent season is a time to ask, “what positive changes are going on in your life?” What changes would you like to see take place? This season is a time to repent and turn toward the good — a time to rejoice over the good in others and to be part of multiplying God’s goodness wherever one can.

Here’s a parable which describes in part how God works in the world and among us.

Many years ago, there was a great famine of water in a town in the south of France. It was a hot summer; no rain fell for months, and as the people always suffered from the want of water, this dry season greatly increased their suffering and many of them died.

A few miles away from the town was a range of hills; in the hills were some beautiful springs of water, but the labor and expense of bringing the water from the springs to the town was so great that very little of it could be brought.

In this town lived a young man. He w.as industrious and good and was shortly to be married to a beautiful young woman whom he dearly loved. But all at once the marriage was put off, the young man began to go about in old clothes, took very little to eat, gave up his pleasant home, and went to live in a garret, and in short became a thorough miser. He went to bed in the dark to save cand1es begged other people’s cast-off clothing, and very soon became changed from a blithe and happy young man into a wretched looking old one. His charming bride-to-be forgot him and married another man. The children called him names in the streets, and everybody shunned his house. After many years of wretchedness, he died. When his relatives went to search his room, they found him almost wasted to a skeleton, and all his furniture sold, while the old man’s body was lying upon a heap of straw. Under his head, they found a will. And only then did it become known that in that dreadful summer forty years ago, this individual had been so saddened by the suffering of the people — especially of the children — for want of water that he had given up his young bride, his pleasant home and his happy prospects to devote

himself night and day all through the weary years to working and saving so that the people might have the beautiful water brought to them from the distant springs in the hills.

How everyone blessed that old man! A reservoir was made in the hills; pipes were laid underground, and water was brought into the town so freely that its inhabitants never thirsted again. The old man did not create the water, neither did he make the people thirst; he simply brought the living water and the dying people together, and he sacrificed himself to do it.

That is how Jesus Christ saves us. He did not create God's love or mercy; those springs of blessing were and always are in the being of God. Christ did not make human beings sinful and sad so that they needed God's love and mercy, but he brings these springs of love and blessing to all of us. He is the channel through which God's love comes to us.

This Advent Season, be open to receiving what Christ brings to us. Amen.