Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2018

Neal MacPherson

CHECKPOINT ADVENT (Part I) Malachi 3:1–4

Luke 3:1–6

The title of this sermon was inspired by another sermon given by Walter Brueggemann called “Checkpoint John.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Brueggemann uses the idea of a checkpoint to describe what we must go through to get to the birth of the Christ Child. I will do the same.

Those of you who have been to the Holy Land know full well that the city of Bethlehem is separated from East Jerusalem by a massive wall constructed by the Israeli government to further isolate the West Bank and the Palestinian people from the rest of Israel. A graffiti painted on the wall says it all. It shows a Christmas tree encircled by a massive wall. To get from East Jerusalem to Bethlehem one has to go through a checkpoint called Rachel’s Crossing. If you are on a tourist bus, it doesn’t seem like that much of a deal. However, if you are alone, checkpoints can be daunting, as it was once for me when I was alone in the city of Ramallah and needed to travel to

East Jerusalem after dark. I had to pass through the Qalandiya Checkpoint. It was a harrowing experience. After giving up my belongings, I entered a rotating iron gate and was locked in the gate for what seemed a very long time until the Israeli guards released me. I remember them laughing in their guard booth while I waited. Then I had to present my credentials. I will never forget the experience.

In a way, John the Baptist represents a checkpoint in our Advent journey towards Bethlehem. John appears in the wilderness east of the city of Jerusalem through which the Jordan River flows. He takes up the voice of the ancient prophet Isaiah and proclaims that he is:

“*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 made low,*

*and the crooked shall be made straight,*

*and the rough ways made smooth;*

*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”*

—Luke 3:4b–6

In the background of John’s appearance in the wilderness is the 40 year-long journey of the ancient Hebrews through the wilderness after their exodus from their slavery in Egypt, and then their crossing through the waters of the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Then, in voicing the words of the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist more specifically recalls the 6th Century BCE journey of the Babylonian Jewish exiles through the wilderness back to their homeland after their sojourn of more than 50 years.

In the Gospel of Luke, John signals that something momentous is about to take place once again. Now is the time to prepare a way in the wilderness for the coming of God’s Messiah, John declares. And the way to prepare for this new liberating act of God is to undergo a baptism of repentance in the River Jordan for the forgiveness of sins. This is the checkpoint through which all must travel on their way to Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ Child.

John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins hearkens back to the prophet Malachi, who described Elijah the messenger with these words:

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’

soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of

silver and he will purify the descendants of

Levi and refine them like gold and silver,

until they presents offerings to the Lord in

righteousness. —Malachi 3:2b–3

What shall we say about John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Let us interpret the word “sins” as anything that separates us from God and from our neighbors, written large. It could be selfishness or greed or apathy or fear or hatred or enmity or anything of the sort.

And let us interpret the word “repentance” according to its meaning. Repentance is a turning around, a 180-degree turn. It is looking in one direction and then turning to face the opposite direction. Undergoing repentance, then would mean turning from selfishness to selflessness, from greed to generosity, from apathy to compassion, from fear to trust, from hatred to love, from enmity to peace. We get the point.

This is the checkpoint through which we must go on our journey to Bethlehem. It’s about transformation, and unless we are willing to turn around and be transformed we will miss the point God wants to make by becoming one of us in the Christ Child of Bethlehem. God wants to become one of us so that we can become God’s beloved sons and daughters.

I have come to believe that John the Baptist and the stories circling around him save Christmas from triteness and sentimentality.

We are all familiar with the nativity scene with the baby Jesus surrounded by Mary and Joseph, shepherds, wise men, sheep and cows. We can become so accustomed to the scene that we do not even think about it. But this year a number of congregations are trying to infuse the scene with a dose of reality. One of these congregations is a Roman Catholic Parish in Dedham, Massachusetts. St. Susanna Parish is displaying the nativity scene in a different way. The scene shows baby Jesus in a black metal cage. The baby is separated from Mary and Joseph. The image of Jesus behind bars is meant to represent the plight of migrant children separated from their parents at the U. S. Mexico border. To the right of the scene, a fence separates the Holy Family and the three wise men. On the fence is a sign reading “Deportation.”

The Rev. Steve Josama, St. Susanna’s priest, says that the church has been accused of blasphemy and politicizing Christmas. Sean Hannity declared that the St. Susanna’s nativity scene shows that Christmas is “under siege.”

But Luke, the Gospel writer makes it clear the birth of Christ does have political implications. Why else would Luke take the pains to let us know that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness when Tiberius was the Roman Emperor, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee. This is the same Herod who orders the massacre of all male babies in and around Galilee in the hopes that Jesus would be one of the victims.

If the story of Christmas does not have the power to change the way things are in our world, then is it really worth our while? The Parish of St. Susanna is doing its best to bring the point home.

And so, my friends, may we have the courage to allow the story speak to us. But first, let us go into the wilderness once again to meet John the Baptist and undergo the repentance he preaches and the baptism he offers. This is the checkpoint through which we must travel if we want to arrive at the truth of Christmas. Let us dare to make the journey. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *“Checkpoint John,”*  The Threat of Life (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)