

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Phil 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

There are two periods within the liturgical year where we spend a concerted effort preparing ourselves for transformation. Advent is the first, and Lent is the second, during both, we are asked to repent. The Greek word used in Scripture is metanoia, which literally translates as “to turn around”. To open our eyes and ears to injustice, and towards God’s justice – and to seek a new way of being.

We are in the midst of Advent. It’s not yet time to exult and rejoice; first we must repent and anticipate transformation – but anticipate with hope. It’s a challenging time, a time to reside in the discomfort and darkness that surrounds us ,and to truly look inward, and outward and face our complicity despite our fragility. Repentance and reconciliation are fundamental to Advent.

This has been an Adventish week for me. On December 6th, I was brought back to the day 32 years ago, when I was in class, in my second year at McGill, just up the road from l’Ecole Polytechnique de Montreal, when Marc Lépine walked into a mechanical engineering class, a discipline dominated by men, and began to separate the women from the men; asking the men to leave the room. He shouted out that he was “fighting feminism”, and he opened fire. He killed 6

women in the class room and then left, to wander the halls, the cafeteria and other classrooms to shoot more women. Within 20 minutes, he had shot and killed 14 women; 14 of my contemporaries. He then turned the gun on himself and took his life. It's the largest shooting Canada has experienced.

When we heard the news, my peers and I stopped in our tracks; speechless and shocked. In the hours and days following the massacre, we tried to make sense of it. But there was no sense to be made. We all attended vigils, we all cried, and we all lost innocence. We spoke of Marc Lépine as a man who was criminally insane, perhaps abused himself as a child, certainly full of hate, and certainly misogynistic. We watched as his mother grieved and was judged. And we spoke of the event as a tragedy.

We didn't talk about it in terms of an act of terrorism against women. Naming the Montreal massacre, a violent terrorist attack against a minority group (women engineers) is a recent thing. It took 30 years to examine the massacre from a systems perspective. Now, the anniversary of the massacre is commemorated as the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women.

Also on the 6th, I heard the writer/lawyer Michelle Good speak as part of the Anglican Diocesan Lecture Series about the impacts of residential schools and

read from her book *Five Little Indians*¹. In her discourse I became convinced that the residential schools, some of which were run by the Anglican Church, were put in place for the purpose of genocide. She read from government documents that made this plain. When we asked her what we can do as allies, she said, write letters to your MPs, use your privilege to effect change, accept responsibility for your own education! In Robin Diangelo's Book *White Fragility*, she defines the crux of the problem for me, she says of White people, "Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race" (p.2).

It's this same fragility that so often impedes us from turning towards the promises of our baptism. Yet, we are asked to turn and face God, and to turn away from our transgressions. I will start with the text from Zephaniah because John makes a deliberate mention of it when he speaks to those who have come to him for baptism... Zephaniah comes towards the end of the 7thC BCE. The Assyrians are strong, but the Babylonians and Egyptians are gaining influence, and the Hebrew people continue to be oppressed. The text is infused with the notion

¹ Good, Michelle, 2020. *Five Little Indians*, Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.

of coming judgment – the day of Yahweh is coming fast. Profound change is on the way. Those high in society will be removed and the remnants left on the Holy Mountain will be the poor and the afflicted. Institutional change is on the horizon and those who have benefited by the unjust structures have plenty to lose! Zephaniah speaks of a cleansing... a day of judgment, but ends with an exulted message of hope. God will again be amongst the remnants!

It's in this context that John the Baptist looking at the crowds that have come to be baptised, begins by saying "You Brood of Vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!" This passage is often called the one where John proclaims the Good News! And it is good news! John compels us to not rest on the promise that we are the children of Abraham, because God can raise children of Abraham from the stones. We have deviated from way of the covenant and the way of Abraham; we have been influenced by the viper – and we are given the opportunity to turn around! Redemption comes to those who bear the fruits worthy of repentance!

The crowd, undeterred by John's accusation to them, face their fragility, face their sins, the wealthy, the toll collectors and the soldiers ask, "What then should we do?"

John gives three examples, that on one level seem to suggest individual acts; seemingly things that can be done in the mundanity of our lives. The first, to those who have more than they need -- share. To the toll collectors, 'collect no more than is prescribed for you'. And to the soldiers, do not extort money using threats and fear tactics. In other words; be charitable, don't steel office supplies, don't get things out of others through force or threat...

But consider what John is saying on a systems level. If you have two shirts, share... which feeds into a socialized structure, an economy of re-use, and impacts the market value of goods. The second was to the toll collectors - who were part of a greater system of taxation that operated in Palestine. There were two forms of tax at the time that were collected by two different enterprises. The first was a land and head tax, and these were collected by the Jewish councils. The second was a system of tolls, customs and duties, which were collected by enterprises who bid for the office. This second was extremely corrupt and represented institutionalized extortion. This is the system John is addressing. The third address is to the soldiers; those that represent the power and muscle of the society. Now consider if the practice of soldiers it to steel from those along the long routes they travel and one soldier refuses to play into the game... how subversive an act this is

in a system of corruption. Consider the abuse that clean police face when they question the racists actions of their peers, consider the George Floyd example.

These mundane daily acts, have implications on society. They are acts of repentance toward God, and they come at a personal price, and with some anxiety, as St Paul acknowledges and encourages us to put our trust in God through prayer and supplication.

We are approaching the incarnation of Christ in our midst, and John is preparing the way for this inbreaking of God. He's preparing our way to redemption. This is good news! T.S. Elliot wrote about the birth of Christ as "A hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death". It's an event as shattering and as emancipating as the crucifixion. It is an inbreaking that leads to freedom, an overthrowing of personal and systemic corruption, and so it's to be anticipated with actions that bear fruit, and with hope. The time is not yet, but when the time comes in two short weeks, it will be a time of great exaltation!