

Third Advent – Year B - December 14, 2008
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
Susan E. Wilmot

Third Advent. If this were a flight plan, the captain would be telling the crew that they are beyond the point of no return. The word is out, we know what we are supposed to be doing to prepare anew for the birth of Christ, and for Christ's coming again. One small reminder, the most important part of our Advent journey isn't shopping, but it might involve making a list. I like lists. Having a list makes me feel organized and prepared. Lists appeal to the linear side of my personality. Lists are comforting because they implicitly carry with them a feeling of planned creativity, like a well-indexed book.

When I read Isaiah this week, I couldn't help but think about the kind of list that we might put together to formulate a job description. This passage echoes the theme of God's servant first seen in the Servant Songs of the chapters that make up second Isaiah, with one huge difference. In the Servant Songs, there is considerable linguistic ambiguity about who the servant is – a specific person, or the nation of Israel? In chapter four of the Gospel of Luke, we hear the story of Jesus attending his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus is invited to read from the scrolls, and He finds the first part of this passage from Isaiah, reads it, and then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." For Christians the prophetic words of Isaiah 61 now carry an additional meaning beyond the good news to the exiled Israelites of their liberation from Babylonian oppression. The words of Isaiah 61 are, for you and me, now firmly associated with Jesus as God's anointed one, God's servant, who is full of the Holy Spirit and the living embodiment of the Good News. Thousands of years before Jesus was even born, here is a prophetic job description listing all the characteristics and actions that the servant of God will fulfill.

The servant is empowered by the Holy Spirit. He is God's anointed one, a rite usually reserved for kings. He is sent by God with an impressive and specific list of duties to perform, the culmination of which is restoration, righteousness and praise to God. The servant does not come into the world to congratulate humanity on a job well done and to encourage us to continue doing what we're doing. Jesus comes into the world because humanity's natural navigation system doesn't function well without God's guidance. Our own dubious directional skills took us several degrees off course, and put us in immanent danger. John the Baptist's cry for repentance is not a polite suggestion, it is like a homing beacon guiding us to safety, and correcting our shaky course to align again with the plan God has prepared for us. Repentance is necessary. It is like a pre-flight safety check. Repentance ensures that we have a strong and clear communication link up with the One whose direction is perfectly true. Repentance is God's gracious gift that opens the eyes of our heart to recognize Jesus as God's anointed, as well as to see and hear what the Spirit is saying through Him about God.

We have now traveled far enough to cross into the second half of Advent, and it is time to consider where we are in our own preparations for the coming of God's Son. Our inner discernment may well have led us to a place of discomfort or denial, as we have gingerly explored the dim and dusty pockets scattered around our inner lives. Personally speaking, I find these to be the most challenging times, where I find myself in dark territory with a compelling desire to resist God's call to repentance. As an introvert, my favorite form of resisting God is intellectual maneuvering, otherwise known as good old rationalization. You see, I have no problem confessing it. I will even name it for the sin it is, because I know what I am really doing when I rationalize is trying hard to put my will ahead of God's will. Unfortunately, confessing and naming the sin doesn't actually change anything, unless and until I am willing to truly repent. And therein lies the rub. Do I really want to change? Do you? Do any of us? Change *is* hard. For many, change is an unwelcome intrusion into the comfort of life-predictable. For me and perhaps for you too, life-predictable is that place where I can easily spend

time on autopilot gliding smoothly along high above the surface of the ground. At thirty thousand feet, nothing disturbs my sense of peace, and everything feels like it is under control. Strapped safely into my own seat, I am equally in no danger of disturbing anyone else.

Change is like flying into thick clouds, we can't readily see where we're going anymore. The ride becomes bumpy and scary, with abrupt stomach-wrenching drops in altitude or sudden shifts in pitch. Once a month, I used to fly between Montreal and Toronto on business. It was a short flight, about 45 minutes, and always aboard a small twelve-seater type 'plane. The sort of 'plane where after everyone is boarded the pilot steps out of the cockpit, eyes the passengers carefully, and then asks two or three people to switch seats so that the weight is more evenly distributed for take off and landing. The 'plane's cruising altitude was about twenty thousand feet, where the likelihood of hitting rough weather is much higher, especially in Canada. It was frequently an unpleasant trip. Our instinctive response to change is that it is also likely to be unpleasant. It is a small step to equate change with the unknown, and for most of us, the unknown is a strange, wildly unpredictable region dominated by fear, and largely out of our control. For the sake of the destination, and for the work I was paid handsomely to accomplish, I took those monthly business trips. For the sake of the joy that awaits us down the road like a much-anticipated vacation, visits with family or friends, or a new grandchild -- we have all come to accept the reality of modern day travel. Long lines at security check points, flight delays, missed connections, or road works, road rage, and rapidly changing driving conditions.

If the basis of our dislike for change is ultimately our fear of the unknown, then the writer of Hebrews has a word for us today about the vital connection between faith and change. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1)." *Faith* is the constant in our lives. Our faith in Jesus is the ground of our being, an eternal reality to hold on to in a world that is constantly changing. For this season of our journey, the prophet Isaiah has the scoop on what we have to hope for in God's anointed servant, Christ our Lord. Isaiah says that God has sent Jesus "to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" ... to comfort and provide for all who mourn, ... and to give the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. In fact, we are anticipating a time of great jubilation, joy and freedom.

Christ our Lord, Jesus the anointed servant of God comes to set us free, to release us from the bondage of sin and death. At first, you and I may not see how we are oppressed or brokenhearted, or how we are truly captives and prisoners. We may not understand why we are in need of God's comfort. We may not even think that our spirit is faint. Life predictable tends to keep us flying high, and cocooned in self. The gravity of life is not found in the superficiality of life predictable, which glides above the surface without disturbing it. On the other hand, quite disturbingly, God became human, and you and I meet God in the dust and dirt by digging into life and challenging the systems of the world. By changing the landscape of our hearts, plowing up the furrows of our minds, and turning over the soil. This is where God sows the seeds of new life, including a deeper knowledge and faith in God. Faith is the promise of freedom in Christ. Our willingness to journey on in faith embraces the unknowns of change because the joyous destination is liberty and deliverance. Change is like our ticket to new growth that allows us to continue to bear fruit in God's service.

Change is hard. Mostly, perhaps, because we have a hard time accepting that we even need it. Our Advent challenge is to discern our own list of changes. That is, each aspect of our lives held captive by self and our desire to do our own will instead of God's. Our repentance tells God that we are willing to re-orient our lives, holding firmly to our faith, and the promised gift of freedom in Christ.

Amen.