

This week is a busy week for parents--for people everywhere. School concerts, year end recitals and performances, Christmas parties and events. I found myself in many locales this past week, but most spiritual for some reason, was writing Christmas cards at the curling rink out by the train station...I was multi tasking, as is often the case, watching a game I don't really understand out of one eye, while penning heartfelt messages, each sealed with a prayer for a church member.

I like writing Christmas cards. The cards I like to send of course are cards that have a Christian theme. Jesus is the reason for the season, after all. While I love snowmen and teddy bears and children and reindeer...without Jesus it isn't a Christmas card. It's a winter card. The cards I have are variously themed, but one says, "May the miracle of Christmas be yours this holiday season." Interesting. Almost on message: it draws me in. The miracle of Christmas. For me that goes beyond candy canes and stockings and straight to the heart of the matter: the miracle of Christmas is the incarnation, the coming of God in flesh. That God so loved the world that God gave his only begotten Son--and he was born for us, became a vulnerable child for us. God became a child. That miracle is ours. It is our hope, our peace, our joy...it means that God has not forgotten us. We are objects of God's love and pleasure. God cares about us and about our lives. He came to show us who He is and to set us free from sin and death and darkness. This is a miracle and one that we need to hear again and again--even in a Christmas card.

But as I was writing Christmas cards, taking up a whole table at the curling rink...I was chewing on the lectionary readings for this week, for today. John the Baptist, not baby John, not the angelic messenger and amazing birth of this messenger, but John the Baptist adulting--moving out, living out his vocation, taking risks and speaking his mind--actually speaking the mind of God--he is a prophet--I wondered how John the Baptist would look or sound on a Christmas card.

(Dear Brood of vipers, I hope that you're having a wonderful Christmas season. By the way, stop cheating, lying or stealing. Love John.

Or...Dear friends, just so you know, the axe is sharpened and aimed at the root of the tree, ready to cut down anything that isn't growing--dead wood works great for Christmas trees! But not the Kingdom of God! Sincerely, John.

If I were to receive a Christmas card from John the Baptist, what would my card say? How would the prophet speak into my life?? What about you?

John's is the Advent task of preparing the way, of clearing a path, of cleaning out the fridge before the groceries get put away....

Do you have to do that? Get rid of leftovers and old containers full of mysterious food before you put away the newly bought and fresh produce?? It's a weekly ritual-- a first world problem. It's

sometimes easy, sometimes not so much. Coming to church on Sunday can be like that too. Jesus is the true bread from heaven, the food that nourishes and gives us true and abundant life. Prepare the fridge of your heart to receive the fresh produce of the Kingdom....sounds a bit crazy, but then again, so did John the Baptist--you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath? John the Baptist attracted crowds of people to hear his impassioned message, he wasn't politely ignored--his was a message of good news--a message that begins with the real raw material of our lives and calls us out into something bigger, brighter and full of the grace of God.

John the Baptist was out there in the wilderness, eating locusts, eating wild honey. and writing Christmas cards.

Has anybody seen CBC's Kim's Convenience? It's a show set in downtown Toronto, about a Korean family who own a convenience store. The writer, Ins Surp Choi was a friend of mine at Wycliffe College. He is a Christian writer and poet. Anyway. He wrote a play about John the Baptist, the prophet...set in the subway system of Toronto--It's called Subway Stations of the Cross. In the play, the prophet figure, who was inspired by a street person, wonders if the modern church would kick Christ out if he didn't conform to the dress code. He also wonders what music Jesus would listen to if he were alive today--and if he'd use plastic bags. The prophet encourages forgiveness and freedom from commercial distractions and the play itself invites us to translate the message from the banks of the Jordan river to our own setting.

What message does John have for us today? Certainly a message of social fairness and equity--treat workers well, don't cheat or take more than your share...When the crowd asks what they are supposed to do about the message they have just heard--a good impulse--our Christian life is not just about believing and thinking and feeling, but about doing and acting and being. John says if you have 2 coats---who doesn't have 2 coats?? give one to the person who has none. If you have food--again...is this something we take for granted?? If you have food--give to those who do not have food. John is outlining Christian behaviour 101 while warning against hypocrisy. It's a radical message of changing and rearranging the normal day to day business as usual way of living and part of me wants to hide behind a tree on the banks of the Jordan. I feel exposed. Called out...but on the flip side, I feel known, seen, attended to...not ignored or taken for granted. God has come into the world and spoken to me. In John's message I understand that how I live my life matters to God--my values, my actions. This is good news.

I have had some recent experiences this year with the people who are a part of AA--Alcoholics anonymous...what I have been struck by in these encounters--is their deep desire to be honest and open, to get the monkey of alcohol off of their backs, by admitting that they need God, and by being honest with God and others--one of the 12 steps is to confess to a clergy person or other trusted person-- and to take a moral inventory. They know that the road to recovery and wholeness and healing is naked honesty--no more hiding. They would feel at home on the banks of the Jordan with John. This week's theme is JOY. How does John's wild prophetic rambling bring joy?? Jesus said the truth shall set you free, and the freedom of being open and transparent before God is a freedom that does indeed bring joy, forgiveness and new life.

We confess, we repent, we turn from the things that make us less than we are meant to be-- and we taste that spiritual joy that comes from God.

In the Subway Stations of the Cross, the prophet says: the stranger in the manger...brings danger. He is a re-arranger.

"A baby in a manger
Maybe a bit stranger
Maybe a baby in a manger in danger
Stranger still
For this baby in a manger
Will be of great danger
To those sitting on their hills
Eating their fills
With their Jacks and their Jills
Till they're ill in their bellies and their tills fill with bills.
Because this baby in a manger
is a changer
He's a re-arranger..."

How will Jesus re-arrange your life this Advent? Are you ready? There is still time, but not much. None of us have a lot of time, really and we do not know the day or the hour...So we read our Christmas card from John the Baptist and get ready!

Amen.