

My brother-in-law, Marshall, was here for a visit three weeks ago. Marshall works for the National Park Service as a law enforcement officer. He currently works at Redwoods National Park in northern California, but has also worked at Crater Lake, Wrangell-St. Elias in Alaska, Craters of the Moon in Idaho, and the Delaware Water Gap. He started with the Park Service in 1986 on Liberty Island, home of the Statue of Liberty. His timing was excellent, for the summer of 1986 was the centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty, and Marshall got to be right in the midst of all the excitement that summer.

The peak of the excitement was the Fourth of July celebration, with its parade of tall ships, dazzling fireworks, and the presence of dignitaries from around the world. It was the presence of the dignitaries that was Marshall's primary concern, especially that of President Reagan. Several weeks before the celebration, the president's advance team arrived to begin directing the preparations. Marshall had to receive FBI security clearance. The island had to be thoroughly inspected for safety to make sure that no terrorist group would use the celebration as an opportunity for a bombing. Navy SEALs scoured the base of the island underwater. Secret Service sharpshooters set up in positions on Ellis Island, a half-mile away, from which they would be able to hit a target the size of a quarter. Special platforms were erected for speakers and the special guests. Miles of cable were run for sound systems and TV coverage. All of this was done by the president's advance team.

It is not unusual for important people to have an advance team working for them. It makes people aware of the significance of the appearance and tries to assure that everything will go smoothly. Even Jesus had an advance team. But we don't call it an advance team. We call it an Advent team, and this morning we have the opportunity to meet three members of Jesus' A-team -- John the Baptist, Ezekiel, and St. Nicholas.

Every year, the traditional church calendar throws John the Baptist at us for two weeks in Advent. From what we know about John, few of us would be comfortable having him around. The reason we would be uncomfortable is that John is honest -- brutally honest -- and we can only tolerate so much honesty about ourselves. The fact that we are uncomfortable hearing what people honestly think about us is seen when we make statements like this -- "Tom (or Dick or Harry), I'm sorry but I need to be totally honest with you for a moment..." We apologize for being honest in our appraisal of another because we know how difficult it will be for them to hear what we have to say.

John the Baptist was straight and honest with people. "Repent" he would urge. "You are self-centered, you're suspicious of people different than yourself, often judgmental of other's actions, and too quick to dismiss your own faults. Turn your lives around and bear fruit that befits repentance, that is, let your actions show that you've made a change."

We may be anxious to get to the celebration of Christmas, but the collective wisdom of generations of Christians says, "Ah, ah...not so fast. The coming of the messiah requires some advance preparation." And the word "repent" comes rolling off of the lips of the Baptizer once again.

The Narrative Lectionary has added the prophet Ezekiel to the A-team this year. Ezekiel lived at the same time as Jeremiah and Habakkuk from whom we've read the past two weeks. The difference between them is that Ezekiel did not personally experience the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 by the Babylonians. That's because he was among the first group of several thousand people that the Babylonians took into exile ten years earlier. Ezekiel writes from a small village about 100 miles south of present day Baghdad, Iraq. After being in Babylon for about five years, at the age of 30, he began speaking words of judgment and doom about Jerusalem, its rulers and people. Like John the Baptist, Ezekiel would make us uncomfortable. He engaged in a large number of extreme activities, the purpose of which were to dramatize and symbolize his message of doom from the Lord. For example, he built a model of the city of Jerusalem out of bricks and set siege to it, like a Lego fort with toy armies (4:1-15). He then shaved his head bald, dividing up his hair in thirds around the city model to indicate that one third would die by the sword, one third by illness or hunger, and one third taken into exile (5:1-4).

In our reading today, he chastises the rulers for being poor shepherds for not taking care of the sheep (the people) entrusted to them. Then he chastises the sheep for being self-centered and not being concerned over the welfare of anyone else.

John the Baptist and Ezekiel were both a little odd, and the message of both is about the same: Repent!

What do you understand "repent" to mean? Many people understand it to be an "I can" experience. They might say, "I am sorry for my sins. I can do better. I can please you, God." In this understanding, repentance is interpreted as our way of turning to God. But this is not the Christian faith. This Christian faith is not about an

individual turning to God, but about God turning to us. Repentance is actually an “I can’t” experience. The repentant person comes before God saying, “I can’t do it myself. Drown me in the waters of baptism and raise me up as a new person, a resurrection person.” Those of us who are in AA groups know well the difference between “I can” repentance and “I can’t” repentance. It’s only when we acknowledge that we can’t control our lives by ourselves that we truly repent and let God be in charge.

We can bear John and Ezekiel’s brutal honesty about ourselves because they are part of the Advance team and not the key figure. Ezekiel is one of the first prophets of the Exile to lift up for the people the hope that the destruction of Jerusalem is not the end of their story, that God is not done with them yet. He concludes his condemnation of the shepherds of Israel with a promise, that the Lord God would come to them and be their shepherd. This shepherd will be from the line of King David and will make with them a covenant of peace. The Christian community understands that this promise is kept in the incarnation, when God takes on human form in Jesus and he claims the role of being the “good shepherd”. (John 10)

John and Ezekiel know, and we know, that the One who comes is love incarnate, a love so broad and deep that no matter how deep our sinfulness, this love goes deeper; and no matter how long our list of shortcomings, this love is longer. In this way, repentance is not only judgment, but also grace, for we turn to a life that is more fulfilling and joyful.

John says “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” and that our repentance should result in our lives bearing fruit. What is this fruit which is supposed to be evident? It probably has something to do with what Jesus describes in the parable we read of the judgment of the sheep and the goats, where the expectation is that we experience the kingdom of God in our lives when we treat others as we would treat Jesus himself – feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned.

That leads us to another member of Jesus’ Advance team, his Advent team, and that is a pastor from the ancient city of Myra on the southwest coast of Turkey by the name of Nicholas -- St. Nicholas. Bishop Nicholas lived in the early fourth century and Dec. 6 is his commemoration day. He was one of the church leaders present in Nicaea in 325 when the Nicene Creed was adopted. I think it is pretty cool that Bishop Nicholas helped write the Nicene Creed. There are many legends extant about St. Nicholas, and it is hard to separate fact from stories that have been elaborated on over the centuries. One of the best attested stories about Nicholas shows his concern for the poor. In those days, for a woman to be married, her parents had to provide a dowry to the groom. If a family was too poor to provide a dowry, their daughters could not marry and they would be sold as slaves. The story is told of Nicholas coming to a poor family’s home at night, when they were sleeping, and tossing three bags of gold into the house, a dowry for each of their three daughters to keep them from a life of slavery. The gifts were tossed perhaps through a window or perhaps through the hole in the roof where smoke from their cooking fire was vented out -- in which case I guess we today would say the gifts came down the chimney. Nicholas would bring food to the poor people of his parish and leave it next to their shoes which they would typically leave at the entrance to their house.

St. Nicholas provides us with an example of bearing fruit in his concern for the poor and needy in his community. We have many people here today who know a lot of about Santa Claus. We know he lives at the North Pole and we know the names of his reindeer and we know it won’t be long before he makes his Christmas journey to our homes. But not all of us, perhaps, are aware that Santa Claus inherited his name from St. Nicholas -- Santa Nicholas -- Sinter Klaas -- Santa Claus.

We have many options available to us to follow the example of St. Nicholas in his concern for the poor. Two that we are highlighting today are the JustGifts Market and our Shoebox Christmas ministry. If you haven’t already done so, I encourage you to do a little shopping after worship in the Market, and today we are going to designate what we call our “loose offering” – the cash in the offering plates – for Shoebox Christmas. If you don’t have time to assemble a Shoebox gift this week, our Senior High youth will help you with it. They will take whatever cash goes into the offering today and shop for Shoebox Christmas gifts. Checks are okay, too – just be sure to put “Shoebox” in the memo line. Looking ahead, for those who enjoy purchasing a gift for someone, we will have several Adopt-a-Family options available next weekend.

The Advance Team -- the Advent Team of John, Ezekiel, and Nicholas -- commend such acts as a great way to get ready for the One who is coming.