

"THE SEASON OF 'NOT YET'"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Luke 3: 1 – 6

// When he was four or five years of age, our son Brian startled us one day in December when he shouted, "I hate Christmas! It takes too long!" //

Many of us can relate to that feeling, can we not?

Earlier and earlier each year we experience the sights and sounds of Christmas –
ginger cookies baking in the oven,
the arrival of the first Christmas card even before you have purchased the ones you
intend to send, the mall's musak carols,
and the neighbour turning on his festive lights right after Remembrance Day.

// On Wednesday Marg. and I returned from visiting family in Florida, where even before the
Thanksgiving turkey had been carved, Santa had taken his place in front of the photographer's
camera at Wal-Mart. //

I am grateful that the church's practice of lighting of just one Advent candle each week forces us to
move more methodically through this season of "not yet". The four weeks of Advent call us to
wait. They give us time to prepare, so that when at last we do gather at the manger, the
holy gift will not be lost on us.

// In a workshop on Advent preaching, I once heard Ernest Campbell, former Senior Minister of New
York's Riverside Church talk about the biblical word "wait" – *apokaradokia*.

"I have friends," he said, "who have named their cat Apokaradokia. Why?"

Because according to this New Testament word, waiting is like a cat crouching.

It is still and silent, every muscle clenched and ready, poised to press into new and
unknown places. "Forget the word," said Dr. Campbell. "Forget the cat.

But remember the posture." (*Locked In a room With Open Doors*)

Waiting is the posture of Advent -- the season of 'not yet'. //

Even scripture passages which the lectionary places before us in Advent keep us from getting to
Bethlehem too soon. You will notice that today's gospel lesson once again brings John to the
centre of the stage.

To some of us, John feels like a bit of an intrusion – a strident, unwelcome voice in what we would like
to be our "Silent night, Holy night" world. John seems out of place.

We fill the Christmas crèche with sweet figures – sometimes including snowmen and Little Drummer
Boys, but we never find a John the Baptist figure on the fringe of the crowd.

As far as I know, Hallmark has not yet crafted a John the Baptist ornament for the
Christmas tree. But every Advent we are forced to trek out to the desert to listen
once again to John preaching a Baptism for the repentance of sins.

It was after all the reputation of John's preaching that led Jesus one day to lift the carpenter's apron over

his head, place it on the work bench, kiss his father and mother goodbye,
and head south into the Jordan valley where this extraordinary man, his cousin John, was
preaching.

He was attracting a lot of attention out there in that wilderness.

Did you know that by the year 50 there were groups following John on three continents?

In that desert, under the scorching sun, sand giving a crunch to lunch, people who
wouldn't be caught dead at a revival meeting – there they were listening to John.

He was a bit of an oddity. He had long hair, unkempt – certainly not trimmed by any Galilean stylist,
nor twisted into dreads. And he had a beard – nothing artistic – just scraggly and long.

He dressed not in fine clothes from the expensive stall in the market, but in camel's hair
with a leather band around his waist. And his food – locusts and honey – sounds
like a challenge on "The Amazing Race".

He was a man of the desert – but they came. The crowds came. And we can be forgiven if we wonder
why. Certainly he was not a "feel good" preacher. He did not sugar coat his message like some
politician trying to put a positive spin on everything.

// One New Testament scholar has put it this way:-

"John said 'The judge is coming, and I'm here to serve subpoenas.'"

He was not a candle in the sanctuary; he was a prairie fire, with a stump as his pulpit, the
sun and moon and stars as chandeliers, the Jordan River his baptistery."

(Fred Craddock, "A chorus of Witnesses", p. 38) //

So why would ordinary housewives and merchants and students and farmers be attracted to someone
like that? Could it be, do you suppose that something in his persuasive preaching had a way of
placing people in the presence of God?

It was not long before many found themselves dripping from something called "Baptism",
testifying that in that holy bath they experienced a power which changed their lives.

"The Messiah is coming," John proclaimed. "Get ready by repenting and confessing your sins."

And when they followed his exhortation, do you know what happened?

Forgiveness! – grace – the gift of God.

So maybe in this season of 'not yet', John's call to repentance is a good way to prepare.

And yet "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" is not a popular word in today's church, is it?

Most of us want to leave the service feeling uplifted by a beautiful tapestry of music and word,
and we don't enjoy the mirror that a call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins
inevitably holds before us.

// Maybe that is why Frederick Buechner wrote what he did – the quote on this morning's bulletin
cover which is one of my favourites:- "True repentance spends less time looking at the past and
saying 'I'm sorry', than looking to the future and saying 'Wow!'" (*Wishful Thinking* p. 79) //

Here Buechner acknowledges that there is a place for "taking stock",

for facing our shadow side, for acknowledging how easily and how often we fall short of God's
dream for us.

It is important for us to acknowledge the grudges we hold onto, the innuendo and the jokes we tell that

put others down. We need to own the ways we manipulate for our own personal gain,
and fail to create a climate of grace in the family, in the church, and the community of
which we are a part.

We need to come to grips with the arrogance that assumes that we are always right, and “they”
are always wrong;

and acknowledge all the ways we contribute to an unhealthy environment --

wasting the earth’s resources, and littering the landscape with paper and plastic.

We need to name our pain especially on this 20th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre,
remembering how violence and fear and hatred and war have polluted the human spirit.

There is so much for which we need to repent...

We know that John’s call to repentance – being able to “look to the future and saying ‘Wow!’” – also
means sharing our gifts and our time, our Food and Fabric and Fun, in order to help make it
possible for all to find their place at the manger.

Because waiting in this season of ‘not yet’ can never be passive,

not when homeless youth on this city’s streets pull cardboard around them as their only
protection from winter’s bite;

not when there are those whose bare cupboards depend on a foodbank for their daily bread.

God’s dream for us will continue to be unfulfilled whenever there are persons in our society who feel
excluded; whenever those who are marginalized and vulnerable are ignored,

when, to use Isaiah’s imagery, we fail to bring good news to the oppressed,

or bind up the broken hearted,

or proclaim liberty to the captives...” (Isaiah 61: 1, 8)

True repentance means looking at the past and saying “I’m sorry”,

and then turning to the gift of grace, the “wow” of tomorrow being offered to us by the God who
in Jesus is making “all things new”.

So what might the “wow” of the future look like?

// Perhaps a snapshot from the L’Arche/Daybreak community of Richmond Hill offers a glimpse of
that. You will know that L’Arche, founded by Jean Vanier, is a world-wide network of
communities for severely physically and mentally challenged adults.

The photograph shows Anne Kingsmill and Roy Turkel, both core members of Daybreak, and they are
at a Blue Jays game. We see the two aging faces of Anne and Roy caught in the absolute delight
of each other’s company. They are both laughing so uproariously that their eyes are
squeezed shut. Roy has his arm around Anne’s shoulder, his broad open smile
sporting a single tooth. Anne’s smile is just as big, her hair peeking out from
beneath the Blue Jays cap that is framing her face.

In many ways, Anne and Roy were as different as people could be.

Anne was a very prim and proper lady with a great sense of decorum.

Roy who had spent many years living in institutional settings, was a bit rough around the
edges. He language was “colourful” and he was often oblivious to social niceties.

Anne was a Christian and a faithful churchgoer.

Roy was Jewish but not practicing any formal religion.

They were so different – yet Anne and Roy came to adore each other – and were adored by so many

others around them. Their relationship is a wonderful expression of what it is to live the "Wow!" of God's grace -- forgiveness, and love, and acceptance, and the celebration of life. //

I'd like to suggest that the image of Ann and Roy at a Blue Jays game is an expression of the dream that is in the heart of God for us all.

And we experience that grace most profoundly in this One whose birth we will soon celebrate – but not yet...

For in the life of Jesus, God embraces us with extravagant, unquenchable love,
 proclaiming to all the world that whether we are poor, or have many resources,
 whether we are white, or are a person of colour,
 whether we believe, or have yet to experience the gift of faith,
 whether we are in prison for some horrendous crime, or are putting
 life on the line in the cause of peace and justice somewhere in
 this dangerous world,

whether we are young, or centenarian,
 gifted or challenged,
 straight or gay,
 pacifist or war hawk...

each of us is a child of God...

each of us is forgiven and embraced by the Holy One who is love...

each of us can claim our share in the "Wow!" that is God's amazing grace.

Amen!