

Third Sunday of Advent
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December 16, 2018, Yr C

In 1974 I was enrolled at Wright State and paying for it by working at Bob Evans Store #10 in Kettering on weekends and over summers. We had opened the restaurant the summer before and had settled into a comfortable working routine. But suddenly the managers were in high managerial mode. Word had arrived that he was coming, he himself, Bob Evans, in person.

The managers were concerned. They made us concerned. Who knew we had fallen so far from the strictures of the BE Manual! They said, "He is coming. Prepare the way before him!" And the grill cooks said, "What should we do?", and the waitresses said, "What should we do?". Even the busboys said, "And what is it that we should do?"

And the day came. Bob Evans arrived. He was dressed in his trademark beige cowboy hat, and his beige country gentleman's coat, and his black string bow tie. He talked to the managers in private, and he watched us work, and he smiled at the customers, and then he did what we all knew he would do ... he left. And we exhaled. After a week or two the managers seemed more relaxed, the manual was back on the shelf, a few reforms stayed in place but generally we all went back to our comfortable working routine. We had received him with all due respect as a successful businessman and potential threat, but we had not taken him into our minds and hearts. His visit did not change our lives that much.

Is that how it was with the people who listened to John the Baptist? Surely some did give away their extra coat and shared their food. The tax collectors may have cut back on their commissions. Soldiers were more respectful of the native populace. But when Jesus came, and he did not cut down anybody with that ax laid at the root, and did not burn anybody up like chaff in the fire, how many drifted back to their old routines? They may have received Jesus with all due respect, but they did not straighten or smooth his way into their minds and hearts. They did not follow through with a new way of life.

Could it be that, when it comes to human motivation, fear is more effective than love? Fear can move us to repent of sin and resolve to live a better life, but this is called imperfect contrition. Perfect contrition is when we repent of sin because we love God and neighbor.

The Baptist did try to motivate people with fear, as when he described the ax laid at the root of the tree, or the fire about to burn up the chaff. But he also appealed to the motive of love.

Yes, fire burns up the chaff, but the fire of the Holy Spirit is love. On Pentecost the Holy

Spirit appeared as tongues of flame. And we pray, “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful, enkindle in them the fire of thy love.”

The Baptist appealed to the motive of love when he called Jesus the Lamb of God. An angry billy goat is frightening, but not a lamb. And the Lamb of God is a sacrificial lamb, who meekly submits to suffering so as to rescue sinners from death.

The Baptist appealed to the motive of love when he called Jesus the bridegroom. When some of his own disciples complained that everyone was going to Jesus, John replied, “The one with the bride is the bridegroom. The best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So, this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase, I must decrease.” (Jn. 3:26f)

John was the best man who had made the preparations. Jesus was the bridegroom, come to woo and win his bride. And John is joyful that he has arrived, and to have played the role he played in his coming.

Yes, weddings are joyful occasions, motivated by love, open to the future, full of promise. Likewise, the coming of Christ. An old prayer says, “Lord Jesus, when you became man you formed a marriage of mankind with God.” Jesus, the God-Man, is the perfect union, the perfect reconciliation, of God and mankind; a union into which we are invited, open to the future, full of potential for future happiness. But just as a human marriage can have difficulties so can our relationship with God. When God became human, he did not remove the struggle from human life, any more than getting married guarantees happily-ever-after for husband and wife. He did not come to remove struggle from our lives but to embrace it, and empower us, and crown us when we triumph.

So even though we are weak, Christ is strong. We may grow discouraged, but Christ never stops trying. We may betray our baptismal vows by sin, but Christ is always ready to forgive. We may renounce him altogether and abandon his family the Church, but he remains faithful to us and waits for the right moment to speak to our hearts.

So, no matter what has happened, no matter how hopeless you think the world is, or the Church, or you yourself, be not discouraged. Fear not! He is in our midst, renewing us in his love, singing joyfully over us as one sings at festivals.