

Advent 2, Year B, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the second Sunday of Advent,
the beginning of the second week
of preparation for the birth
of the baby in the manger,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Recently
I had the privilege of holding
my then day-old goddaughter, Sarah.
She is beautiful.
And when you hold a newborn
you know that there is nothing more miraculous, nothing more precious
than this new life.

And this week
at the annual Christmas lunch,
I had the privilege of holding baby James,
who will be baptized today.
He is a little older than Sarah,
a little more interested in things around him;
he is beginning to show signs
of the person he is becoming.
And each new stage of development
reminds us
of how miraculous, how precious
this new life is.

Which is why,
in our baptism service
we're brought up short
when we get to those first questions,
"Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
"Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
"Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?"

It seems incongruous, even wrong
to talk about wickedness and evil and sin

when we are holding in our arms
a precious baby,
a child who has had no opportunity
to do anything wrong.

And as it happens
those three questions
come from way back in the history of the church,
way back
when most people thought
that children were born in sin
and so when a baby was brought to church for the first time,
you had to have a ceremony of exorcism
to cleanse them from that sin.

But over time, the church became aware
that that way of looking at evil,
as something that was primarily an individual matter,
wasn't adequate.
It didn't account for the things people saw around them, things that pointed to evil being
something much bigger than the individual,
something tied up somehow
in the whole of our world.
And it didn't account for the way
that Scripture
talks about our whole world
as imperfect, groaning, longing
for goodness,
as imperfect, groaning, longing
for God.

And if you look carefully at those three questions
you'll see the same thing.
Because while they are about our individual choice to reject what is evil,
they are even more
about the reality
that we live in a world
that is scarred,
damaged,
where we can't help
but be caught up in it.
Not because we ourselves
are evil at birth

but because our whole world
is tainted.

And you don't have to look far
to see it.

On the front page of the New York Times today, and on Newsday:
Two hostages, who had been held by an Al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen
were killed during a raid by US commandos.

It's easy to identify the bad guys, at least from our perspective:
the terrorists who took the two men hostage.
And the good guys, the hostages, a photojournalist and a teacher,
trying to help the people of that region.
And our own military.

And yet, if you dig a little deeper,
you discover the complex history of the Middle East.
Land fought over for centuries, ostensibly in the name of religion.
Land occupied by western powers during the World Wars of the twentieth century,
and international boundaries drawn on maps without regard for local tribal tradition.
Geology rich in oil,
and international interventions
to maintain the pipelines.
And poverty,
the poverty that brought those two men
to work there.

We might identify evil most easily
in the terrorists,
but it's wound through and through the history of the whole region.
Complicated, tangled,
a web that catches us all
in different ways.

The same is true
of recent events here in the United States.
The shooting
of Michael Brown,
the death
of Eric Garner.
It's easy to point fingers.
Michael Brown acted in a threatening way;

the police officer was prejudiced.
 Eric Garner resisted arrest;
 the police used too much force.
 Even at the individual level, it's complicated.
 And even more so
 when you dig a little deeper.

Like it or not,
 our nation's history of slavery
 and the subsequent Jim Crow laws
 continue to shape us.
 Racism runs deep
 and it's complicated by poverty
 and access to education
 and employment
 and our simple fears of those who are different from us.

It's easy to point fingers;
 but evil is wound through and through the history of our nation
 Complicated, tangled,
 a web that catches us all
 in different ways.

No wonder
 we need those questions in the baptismal service.
 Not because evil resides in this
 or any baby,
 but because the children we bear
 have to live in this world,
 this scarred, broken, damaged world
 and they need
 God's help.

“Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
 “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
 “Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?”

And then there are three more questions:
 “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?
 “Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?
 “Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?”

And those three questions

are the other side of the coin.
 Yes, we live in a world scarred by evil.
 But we also live
 in a world blessed by God.

We see it in our psalm today.
 “You have been gracious to your land, O LORD,” says the psalmist;
 “you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.
 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people *
 and blotted out all their sins.”

The psalmist speaks
 of his own experience. The experience
 of having his own sins
 and those of his people
 blotted out, removed, forgiven.
 There has been redemption.

But they have only received a taste of it.
 Because what the second half of the psalm suggests
 is that there is still more to come.
 Salvation is near
 but it hasn't quite
 arrived.

Or to use the language that Jesus uses,
 the kingdom of God is near, but not yet here
 in its fullness.

Look at what the psalmist dreams of,
 look at what he sees
 that God promises.

“I will listen to what the Lord God is saying,
 for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.
 “Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him,
 that his glory may dwell in our land.
 “Mercy and truth have met together;
 righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
 “Truth shall spring up from the earth,
 and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
 “The LORD will indeed grant prosperity,
 and our land will yield its increase.

“Righteousness shall go before him,
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.”

It’s such a wonderful vision.
Where the world has been scarred, broken, damaged,
where the world has been imperfect, groaning, longing,
now we see a vision
of a world that is renewed, healed, whole.
Free of the power of sin,
free of the power of evil,
free of the power of death.
Characterized by mercy and truth,
righteousness and peace and prosperity,
A world that is saved.

And there’s the connection. There’s the connection.
Because in Greek, the original language of the New Testament,
and of a major early translation of the Old Testament,
the word for salvation
is the same as the word for healing.
So that salvation and healing
are the same thing.
And in Jesus Christ, in Jesus Christ
all things are saved,
all things are healed.
Including our world.
Including us.

Which is why those three questions
about the reality of evil
are followed by three questions
inviting us into faith,
faith in Jesus Christ.

But of course
we still wait.
We still see
evil around us.
Faith in Jesus
isn’t some sort of magic pill.

We live in an in-between time,
a time in between

the coming of Jesus
the first time, as a boy,
and the coming of Jesus again
when all things will be made right
and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

We can look back and see what God has done.
We can see what God is doing now.
But still we wait
we wait
for God to transform this scarred, damaged world of ours,
to heal it,
and us with it.
That's what Advent
is all about.

But meanwhile, meanwhile
God invites us.
God invites us
to join in,
to join in the healing of the world.
That's what living as a follower of Christ
is all about.
Joining with God
in the salvation, the healing of the world.

Working against racism, seeking reconciliation between those who are like us
and those who aren't.
Looking for justice
for those who are oppressed.
Righting wrongs
recent
and long past.
Small step by small step.

So join with God, join with God,
in this holy work,
in healing,
in salvation.