

I am not sure if this is true of all women or just the ones in my life. But when the doorbell rings or someone knocks the inevitable question is: Who is that? Now it was not just the door. When the phone would ring my grandmother would always say, “Now I wonder who that is?” I always wondered how we were expected to know the answer to her question until the door or telephone was answered. What were the credentials that would allow us to let someone in—relative, friends were no problems but what about the stranger. What were the credentials that would allow us to let them in?

Paul, as he writes to the congregation in Rome, prepares the way for their acceptance of Phoebe, a minister/deacon of Christ, should she visit Rome. In chapter 16:1-2 he paves the way for her coming to Rome, “should she come...” He also prepares the congregation in Corinth for a possible visit by Timothy with the same words, “should he come” (I Cor. 16:1). There were many false teachers, preachers in Paul’s day and he wanted to make sure the congregations would welcome those who came with Paul’s blessing. These were those who would not distort the Gospel Paul had preached in their midst. He wanted them to know, “who was at the door.”

They were a people of expectation and hope. The promise was one was coming who “would prepare the way for the coming Messiah.” John the Baptist comes as one who fills the role promised by Isaiah. John was born to a couple in their old age, their only child, a miracle. He was a Nazirite, one dedicated to God from birth. He was full of the Holy Spirit. He grew up in the desert and was a “nobody” until he came on the scene. Luke records (1:80) *“and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly in Israel.”* His diet was strange from our standards: locusts and wild honey and his clothes were made of camel’s hair! He was unconventional at best. I like the way Eugene Peterson describes John in the Message: “thunder in the desert.”

John’s task was to call Israel to repentance. Calling the people of God back to God. He knew his role. He was not the Messiah. He was only the one who was to prepare the way for the One who was coming. We often need someone to call us back. To remind us of what is happening in the world, in our lives and to call us back to the basic foundations of our faith. I hope you have read the letter from Bill Clemmer in the Weaver. He reminds us of what is happening in Congo right now. His letter was not written months but weeks ago – he calls us to prayer and action on behalf of a terrible situation in the world. His task is not unlike John’s – reminding us of who we are and who we represent in the world.

John calls Israel back to God. Can you hear them? Why should we have to repent? Are we not the people, the chosen of God? Why should we listen to this “freak” in the desert?

To say John attracted the attention of the religious elite would be an understatement. The news of his preaching has reached Jerusalem and the heads of the Scribes and Pharisees journey out in the desert to see and hear John. Today all the major news outlets would be there. The years of silence of God is now being broken and here is one who claims to come “in the name of the Lord.” Here is one who is stirring the waters. Here is one who has people asking faith questions again. Here is one who attracts people who are seeking answers. Would they recall the promise of Isaiah 40? John’s response is: they have strayed from the purpose God has called them to. They no longer represent the true picture of who God is and there is One coming who will set things right again. One who is greater than John, so great that John is not worthy to bend down and tie his shoes. John is only the messenger, the one who is to prepare the way. The one who is coming is “standing at the door.”

Advent reminds us of “who is at the door.” Whenever I think of this statement I think of the letter in Revelations to the church at Laodicea. Here we have the image of Christ standing outside the door, knocking, seeking to be let in: “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock*” (Rev. 3:20). Christ wants to be a part of the life of the Church, of the people of God – but does not force himself in. He waits for the door to be opened.

There is a painting by William Holman Hunt, Christ, the Light of the World. Christ standing outside a door waiting for it to be opened. The original painting, the first draft, is in one of the colleges at Oxford, England. It took the major part of a day for us to find the college and then to find someone with a key to the chapel, which they handed to us freely to view this painting. It is hanging, as I remember, on the right hand side of the chapel as you face the front. There is Christ waiting to be invited in. Knocking. Who is at the door? A reminder of all who enter that chapel of the Advent call of Christ on his world, his church, his people.

This for me is the question of Advent, Where is Christ in our lives today? The world seems shattered. We are facing a world financial crisis. There are wars and rumors of wars. Food banks are running out of food due to the demand. There is illness and hatred. The world is looking for answers. We are looking for one who will lead us and we are not looking at the Church. We seek someone to lead us from the darkness into the light but the Church cannot stop fighting among itself to lead.

Jesus stands at the door willing to lead, but are we willing to follow? His ways are unconventional at best. We are called to love and pray for our enemies. We are called to feel those who would hate us (along with those who are a part of us). We are called to bless them who would persecute us and to turn the world up-side-down. This is not the image or the answers the world would give us. Why then are we, the church, not leading in Christ’s way?

When John's disciples came to ask Jesus if he was the One Jesus responded in this way: *"Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor"* (Matthew 11:4). Can we say that of the Church today? Can we say that of whom we are and what we are doing in the world, our community?

There is a powerful illustration of what the Church is called to be in Philip Yancey's book, Prayer. He tells the story of a woman who learned that her daughter was sexually molested at age four by a relative. The mother writes,

"...the more I learned many abusers have been victims of abuse as well. I felt compelled to pray for my brother-in-law. Where I got the strength to pray this prayer, only God knows. It's not natural for a mother to pray for those who hurt her children. But I realized he would never change without God healing what probably were very old wounds in his life. I struggle daily to forgive him, and worry that by doing so, I'll minimize the pain and suffering he has caused—**but who is going to pray for this man?"** (emphasis mine).

As we come to the Table of our Lord – as take again the bread and cup in remembrance of him—as we deal again with Advent and the coming of Christ—Who is at the door? Where is Christ today? Is he still standing at the door waiting to come in to change the very core of our being? Is he still knocking, waiting, hoping—standing at the door?

Yancey, Phillip, Prayer, Zondervan, 2006 (p. 313)