

“Bearing the Fruit of Advent”  
Romans 15:4-13  
Matthew 3:1-12

It’s ironic this week that while we are in Advent—a season of preparation and hope—we lost one of the greatest leaders for hope and transformation of our time, Nelson Mandela. The Reverend J.C. Austin, the Director of Christian Leadership Formation at Auburn Theological Seminary, reflected on the life of Nelson Mandela this week through the Huffington Post Religion Blog (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-jc-austin/the-real-miracle-of-nelson-mandela-4398496.html>).

Austin was a student at the University of Cape Town in the late 90s and reflects on going to see President Mandela speak in observance of World AIDS Day. He writes:

“Inexplicably, they had only set up one metal detector through which to run the entire crowd, so the line was massive and slow. As more and more people arrived, the crowd began pressing in. My wife and I were in the line and began to get pushed forward from behind. As we finally got near the checkpoint, they shut it down entirely, no longer able to control the flow through the detector, and began shouting derogatory things at the crowd for not obeying them. The crowd shouted back at the police and pushed forward, nearly lifting us off our feet in the process. Then the police began to get anxious and called in reinforcements wearing batons and holding onto large dogs. They formed a line, and the crowd pressed toward it. It was like the whole place had flashed back ten years or so, with angry white people threatening violence against a defiant crowd. And somehow, my wife and I found ourselves in the very front of the crowd, unable to stop ourselves from being pushed toward the waiting police line. The batons were coming out; the visors were coming down; the dogs were straining against their collars toward us.”

“And then: Just as the anger and hostility was reaching a crescendo peak, just as I was wincing from the expected blow of a baton coming down on my head, I felt a blast of energy sweep from the front of the vast room, where those who had cleared security already were waiting, and over us into the crowd, as if a lightning bolt had struck and the electricity had surged through the room. Suddenly the men were cheering, the women were ululating, the police officers had straightened up and brought their dogs to heel. Suddenly, the whole crowd and police stepped back from each other at the same time. The batons disappeared and a line appeared in front of the checkpoint. The police stepped back up to the scanner, and people began to go through it.”

“It was a miracle. And it happened because suddenly, Nelson Mandela had arrived. Just by being present, he changed the reality in the room, reminded everyone of who and how they wanted to be as individuals and as a society, and they responded.”

Austin reflects on this story in his blog entry, entitled, “The Real Miracle of Nelson Mandela Isn’t What We Think.” He defines miracles as happening “when ‘the way things should be’ overcomes ‘the way things are.’... That’s what happened in the ‘South African Miracle,’ when against every reasonable expectation, South Africa went from being a brutal, racist, minority-controlled regime to a new reality in which the former oppressors and formerly oppressed would join together in a multiracial democracy.”

But Austin emphasized that Nelson Mandela “did not *create* those miracles; he did not perform or achieve them by himself, as he would be the first to say.... The true greatness of Mandela, the most profound miracle he performed, was that he made his supporters, his enemies, and his

admirers around the world *believe* that the world could change and be redeemed; he made all of us believe that ‘the way things are’ is not the way things have to be. He made us believe we could be part of making that change happen, in becoming miracle-workers ourselves. He showed us amazing ways of doing that, and he made us *want* to join him.”

([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-jc-austin/the-real-miracle-of-nelso\\_b\\_4398496.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-jc-austin/the-real-miracle-of-nelso_b_4398496.html))

This is what John the Baptist is calling people to in our Gospel lesson this morning. John is calling his listeners to a complete transformation, to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” What would Advent be without John the Baptist’s voice “crying out in the wilderness,” as Isaiah prophesizes.

John was the biblical day Grizzly Adams. He wore itchy camels’ hair and ate a simple and strange diet. He hung out in the wilderness—in the desert—away from first-century mainstream society.

And he didn’t care much about flattering that first-century mainstream society. He even called the Pharisees and Sadducees, those religious leaders or wealthy law-keepers of the day, a brood of vipers; not exactly flattering, no matter what century it is.

And he stood out in the desert, proclaiming repentance.

Repentance is one of those words that gets a bad rap in modern Christianity, mostly because we’ve done a terrible job of defining it. Repenting does not mean confessing you sin. Repenting does not mean asking forgiveness. Repenting really isn’t about words at all. Repenting is about our hearts, a transformation of our hearts.

Have you had times in your lives where you have suddenly understood God more deeply, more clearly? Maybe you had some sort of moving experience or even a painful event that brought you in deeper relationship with God. Perhaps you read a certain Scripture passage in a new light or heard a sermon that changed your understanding. Or maybe you were part of a book study or prayer group that helped you understand Jesus in a totally new way that helped move your life in a different direction.

That is repentance, a new way that you live your faith out in differently than before because a change has taken place. Not because of guilt or because of sin, per se, but because the Holy Spirit baptized you with new understanding; and you followed through on that understanding with new actions: by treating those around you with more grace and love, by being better stewards of what God had given you, by reaching out directly to people who needed help.

THAT is what John the Baptist is proclaiming and calling all of us to—that kind of transformation. “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” He is calling his listeners not just to an external baptismal cleansing but to an internal baptismal change.

He says to the Pharisees and Sadducees after calling them sons of snakes, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” In other words, don’t rely on your background, your upbringing, the external facts of your life that make you affiliated with God. Because God can transform anyone—even rocks—into children of God.

That might have sounded like bad news to the Pharisees and Sadducees. They relied on their heritage as chosen people for their religious status. Instead, John says, heritage has nothing to do with being a child of God. The one who comes after John is the one who will change everything.

The one who comes after John—Jesus himself—can transform anyone’s heart, not just the hearts of those who are God’s chosen children.

John’s words may have sounded like bad news to the first-century religious leaders, but they sure sound like good news to me. That the Holy Spirit can transform me, you, someone walking by on the street, regardless of our backgrounds, sounds pretty great. And that by baptizing us, we receive a transformation of the heart for grace and love, sounds like very good news to me.

That is what we are called to in Advent—preparing ourselves for a transformation of heart. Sometimes by the grace of God that transformation happens in spite of ourselves. Sometimes, we’re living our self-absorbed lives, packing our calendars with either nonsense or things that are hardly life-giving, and blindly walking through our days, and WHAM! Baptism of the heart; we are struck by grace.

But most times, that kind of transformation happens because of faithful obedience. We read Scripture every morning and try to carry it through our day, and it bears fruit in our lives. We come to worship on Sundays and light candles to represent hope and peace, joy and love, and are reminded that our lives are centered around Christ. We gather in groups to pray and discuss Scripture. We serve those in need in the community. And transformation has tilled soil in which to grow.

Advent is a time to till the soil of our lives. As we prepare, we are called to do those things that prepare our hearts for change. Last week, my challenge for you was to keep awake—to keep alert to God’s hope in our lives. Did you notice any special times that you were aware of hope?

This week I challenge you to find space for preparing yourself for transformation. Our candle this week is peace, and the passage from Isaiah reminds us the new kingdom we already have in Jesus Christ: a kingdom where the wolf lives with the lamb and where the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord. May we seek to best prepare ourselves for that kingdom, so that we can be part of that transformation.

Transformation of the heart is what Nelson Mandela called South Africa and all of us to with his words and actions. Mandela ushered in hope. The way that he lived his life and the practices he had of reconciliation, forgiveness, and grace, even to his very captors as he spent twenty-seven years in prison, helped give strength to others. His choice to forgive and to live out God’s reconciliation bore witness to God’s redeeming love.

One of my favorite Nelson Mandela quotes comes from an interview he gave in Johannesburg with John Battersby in 2000 (published in the *Christian Science Monitor*, February 10, 2000). He said, “One of the most difficult things is not to change society—but to change yourself.”

Transformation begins not from planning and hoping for the things around us to change but for we ourselves to be personally transformed. And then, in that transformation, we usher in God’s kingdom of peace and reconciliation. May this be our prayer, and may this transformation take place in each of us in this Advent journey and as the body of Christ. With God’s help and the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ name. Amen!