

BEHOLD!

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Religious zealots are threatening the stability of world governments. Riots in the street protesting government oppression. Government corruption is rampant at the local and national level. The economy isn't looking too good especially with the spike in oil prices. That would be olive oil prices. Yes it was pretty tough in the year 70 AD for members of Mark's community when this gospel passage was probably written.

Into this chaotic world comes John the Baptist who says that he is called to prepare the way for the one who is coming, for the one who will bring the reign of God to the world.

Mark begins his story with the command to first see, here is John the one who is to prepare the way.

As I looked at the various translations of today's passage I pulled up the King James Version and there was the word behold. The word see in the NRSV is replaced by the word behold.

This reminded me of a clergy retreat that I attended led by Bishop Sutton of Maryland. He spoke of how unfortunate that we now have the word see in this passage instead of behold. The NRSV changed the word because the intention is that the NRSV would be contemporary language and we simply do not use the word behold anymore and that is truly a shame.

This word is used 1326 times in the King James Version and over 1200 times in the New American Standard translation used by many Roman Catholic churches. The NRSV have removed it and replaced with the words look and see, but this seems to come at a great loss in meaning.

Behold! This is not merely to look at or to see something. This has weight, heft, a sense of awe and reverence. Too often we look at something or see something, but do not notice anything. This is similar to the jet noise here in Virginia Beach from Oceana. We hear the jets all the time, but we really don't notice most of the time. It is just background noise.

How much do we see, but do not take time notice? How many of you noticed that when we repainted the parish hall we altered the hangings in the front? For the first few weeks we pinned the tassels up behind them and nobody noticed. Finally we removed them entirely and changed the look, yet how many of you have noticed the change.

Advent calls for us to behold, not just see.

The dictionary defines behold as to observe; look at; see. More importantly it means to perceive through use of the mental faculty; to comprehend. Used in the imperative for the purpose of calling attention. Synonyms are regard, gaze upon, view; watch; discern. All of these words also imply time, taking time to allow comprehension and discernment for these do not happen quickly.

When we behold something we do more than just see it. We observe, comprehend and most importantly discern what it is we are looking at. We attempt to make meaning.

John is an unexpected messenger. Someone we might look at, maybe even notice, but not necessarily pay any attention to. We probably would not comprehend him or his message in our time either.

Some of you were here for my first sermon on Advent 2 in 2007 when we had the Matthew version of this passage. That was Matthew's appearance of John the Baptist and Barry Higgenbotham came bursting in the back door dressed as John the Baptist yelling about broods of vipers and who warned you. I must admit the look on most of your faces was something to see. People like John make us nervous and uncomfortable. We tend to not want to behold a person like this, to be honest we would rather not even look or see. In our hearts many of us wish people like John would just go away. They do not bring us words of comfort.

I am reminded of the ghost of Marley talking to Scrooge. In that visitation Scrooge tries to dismiss what he clearly sees as a bit of mustard or a bad potato. There is more gravy than of grave is the line he uses. At that point the spirit rises up and gets Scrooges' attention. Scrooge then asks him to speak words of comfort, but the spirit has none. What he has is words about change and repentance. These don't appear as words of comfort at the start, but ultimately they are the words of comfort that Scrooge needed to hear.

John brings us similar words of challenge, pointing to a greater lesson that is to come, one much greater than he represents. John is the messenger and if we fail to behold what he is and says we then risk missing the message that is to come.

How unlikely is John the Baptist? How unlike people today who want to get our attention. John doesn't say look at me, I have a great message, I am important. He points us to the real message and steps out of the way. And that message and messenger is equally counter-cultural. John sets us a way of behaving in light of the message Christ brings. This message is all about serving the one who is greater than us. Like John we are not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal, but we are called to serve him.

Now talk about counter cultural. We spend millions in this country building our self-esteem in a variety of ways. Yes a good healthy self-image is important for a well-integrated person. Please do not misunderstand me; I am the last person to tell you to wallow in huge amounts of guilt and low self-worth. I am however calling us to look, to see, to behold how we behave and act. This is a call to behold our own reality and our own humanity. To realize that like John we are not God. We are not Christ. There is ultimately a power out

there who knows more than we do. An ultimate being who understands us better than we can imagine. And one who loves us no matter what.

While not as penitential a season as Lent, Advent it can serve in the words of our Presiding Bishop as a mini-Lent. This is a chance especially in this season of economic hardship to behold our lives. Advent is a chance to examine our lives and our priorities. I was in a discussion the other night about how God can turn the worst of events into good if we will give God the chance. This just may be a chance for all of us to take a deep breath step back, behold the world and ask, what in God's name is going on?

Think about that question. "What in God's name is going on" is a phrase I have heard used, but what a powerful question to ask if we really mean it. This asks us to step back and behold, to really look at what is happening. Then in God's name to ask what is happening. The question then needs to become, what in God's name am I going to do. This is a question about priorities. This goes back to the passage from Christ the King Sunday about what you do for the least of these you do also for me. What we do for the least of these we do in God's name. That is what makes Christian outreach different than simple social justice or good deeds. We do outreach from our church because we are doing these acts of charity in God's name. We have stepped back, taken the time to really look, to really see, to behold the state of the world and then chose to act in ways that glorify God.

Just as we are called to behold the one who enters into the chaotic world of the first century we too are called to behold the one who comes into our chaotic world. The one who wants to bring peace, justice, to usher in the kingdom. We cannot welcome him until we behold him.

If we truly behold Jesus, then we understand, we begin to comprehend who Jesus is. We also may begin to comprehend what it is he is calling us to do both individually and as a congregation.

Behold I am sending a messenger ahead of you who will prepare the way.

Behold I bring tidings of great joy!

Behold. Make this your mantra for this Advent.

Take the time to behold in all the power of this word, the one who was and is and is to come.