

Last week, I introduced our Advent theme for this year, *Hungering for God*. And I asked: what are you hungering for; what is the deepest longing of your heart? Maybe you've been able to give that some thought, or maybe there's just been too much to do and not enough time to think such deep thoughts. But maybe, if you found yourself in a rare quiet moment, you identified what it is you really yearn for. Although, you know, sometimes it's when something pushes your buttons, when you, for some reason, become upset or angry or sad or wistful or afraid, and if you're willing to go there, you allow what it is that you really crave to surface.

And that's when the second question of Advent becomes: how does the birth of Christ into our hearts and world feed your hunger? Advent is not simply the four weeks before the celebration of Jesus' birthday. It is also an invitation to prepare for the always-to-be-expected birth of what John Shelby Spong calls "ChristPower." 1 This is just a part of his poem:

Thus human life was born,
but individual expressions of that human life
were marked with a sense of
 incompleteness,
 inadequacy,
 and a hunger
that drove them ever beyond the self
to search for life's secret
and to seek the source of life's power.

Finally, in the fullness of time,
within that human family,
one
unique and special human life appeared:
whole, complete, free, loving, living, being, at one, at peace, at rest.

In that life was seen with new intensity
that primal power of the universe,
Christpower.
And it was good!

. . . for Christpower is life
 eternal,
 without beginning,
 without ending.

It is the secret of creation.
It is the goal of humanity.

In this being "marked with a sense of incompleteness, inadequacy, and a hunger - to go ever beyond the self to seek the source of life's power" - we see the Advent hope for which we prepare: the always-to-be-expected birth of Christpower into our hungry hearts.

This is what John the Baptist was about. His father, Zechariah, whose song we just sang, proclaimed, "You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, go will go before to prepare God's way." And it's easy to see how John was identified as the messenger prophesied by the prophet Malachi five hundred years earlier: "Behold, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me."

Now, a quick word about prophets. There is a common misperception that prophets predict the future, but that's not so. It is said that the biblical prophets do more forth-telling than fore-telling, more prognosis than prediction. Prophets of any era are able to see with laser-like vision into the significance of current events in the lives of God's people - and then speak a word from God to provoke people to change. This is what John was doing in his call to repentance - which doesn't mean to feel bad, but to think differently. Repentance is an invitation to be our best selves.

Although the prophets would never say it is not an easy process to do so. Malachi described it as "like a refiner's fire and fullers' soap, burning and purifying. There is pain involved in refining and cleansing; there is pain involved in dying and rising. But it is in the midst of the refining process that the gold of Advent hope is forged. And the function of Advent is to focus on this aspect of life, the always-to-be-expected coming of Christ into our experience.

You know the name "Malachi" literally means "my messenger." But all of these texts are talking about a messenger, a herald, someone who is able to discern and speak a word from God to provoke people to change. And as I was thinking about addressing hunger and longing and preparing our hearts to make room, I wondered who are the messengers today? Or more specifically, who are my messengers, your messengers? Who has been a John the Baptist in my life; who has called me to repentance, challenged me to change and grow? Who are the prophets in your life who have called you to be your best self?

So, as I thought about my longings, I tried to identify those who had somehow played a part in fulfilling them. Of course my messengers won't be the same as yours. But hopefully this might help you identify your own. If I'm honest with myself, I must confess that I hunger for (at least) 3 things: security, family, and contentment. And while I would still call these "issues," I also know that I have been confronted, challenged, loved, pushed, pulled at times – into repentance, into a different way of thinking and being. And in the process of refining and cleansing, something was opened – a space for a new way, a cradle for Christpower.

One of the times I remember was one of those laser-like, prophetic moments came almost 30 years ago, when my friend Frank chastised me for having a pervasive negative attitude. It was a hard thing to hear, a harsh criticism, but I did hear, and started to listen to myself and ask myself where it came from. Changing that attitude didn't happen overnight (I know, it still comes out now and again), but it's in being aware of it and dealing with the issues involved in it that I began to address my longing for peace and contentment. I hadn't thought about that incident in a long time. But the truth is, that in that moment, Frank was my John the Baptist.

I'd have to give one of my spiritual directors credit for being a prophet of security. I'd give all of my spiritual directors a lot of credit. But Carol challenged me to learn to trust. One lesson I never forgot is that money is simply financial energy that we use and God can use to move around in ways that are good for us. That sounds simplistic, but it alleviated a whole lot of anxiety over going into debt to go back to school for my doctorate. I still can get in a twist about money and planning for the future, but I'm able to get a handle on it much quicker, especially when I recall the words of the prophet, Carol.

Family is a tough one. It's a continuing longing, littered with hurts and disappointments. But there is one bright spot: Shirl. Years ago, back in Buffalo, as we were lamenting our difficult family relationships, Shirl and I decided to become sisters. Shirl is older than I am, and we're very different in many ways. But she has always been there for me. When I first moved here and literally had no money for a cup of coffee, she sent me a Starbucks card on my birthday. She called, she sent cards. It's much more difficult now, since we live so far apart, and I haven't always been the most attentive sister. But as I thought about this hunger for family and wondered where Christpower was present or could ever be born – I thought of Shirl, my messenger of Advent hope. And I called her today to tell her I love her.

Those three are not the only ones I could identify as messengers who have helped me prepare God's way into my heart. But what I'm trying to get at is this Advent question of how the birth of Christ into our hearts and world feeds our hunger. And at this point in the season, as we read about Malachi, and Isaiah, and Zechariah, and John, we see the importance of the messengers in our own lives. I hope that you will find the time to identify who yours have been. And be on the lookout for those yet to come.

Because – we are not just on the receiving end of prophetic messages. We also function as John the Baptist. We help others to prepare God's way. Maybe you can already identify a time when you were able to speak a prophetic word and help someone be his or her best self or begin to crack open a space where Christpower could find a home. Maybe you're thinking of situations when you were able to bring a word of hope to a place in our world in need of repentance.

We might not be comfortable putting ourselves in the role of John the Baptist, certainly not the locusts and wild honey part. But as heralds of good news, as messengers of the possibility of fulfillment for our hunger for God – to quote a phrase, “yes, we can.” And the more we are open to the Christpower feeding our own hearts' needs, the better able we will be to feed others.

. . . for Christpower is life
 eternal,
 without beginning,
 without ending.

It is the secret of creation.

It is the goal of humanity.

Amen

1 John Shelby Spong, *Christpower*, St. Johann Press, 2007.