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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, December 11, 2022

3 Advent, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#)

[Psalm 146:4-9](#)

[James 5:7-10](#)

[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

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“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” says Jesus.

What does it mean to take offense? Or to give offense? It seems like both have to happen, the giving and the taking, for an offense to happen. Sometimes we might not mean to give offense yet our actions may create it anyway. Sometimes we might take offense when we maybe didn't actually need to take it. If a tree falls in the forest and gives offense with no one around to take it, does it make a sound?

We live in a place and time where offense can be a kind of social weapon. Where trolling has become a verb, the practice of making intentionally offensive comments online to try to provoke a reaction, maybe at first done by people with nothing better to do as a form of twisted entertainment, eventually weaponized by those with something to gain by stoking the mutual animosities of people against one another, or by those who seek to shift the window of what's acceptable to say in public so that what once might have gotten a person drummed out of polite society can begin to get a person interviews and fundraisers.

We also live in a place and time where many are becoming more aware of glaring offenses that once could go uncommented on or even celebrated in privileged circles. When bigoted comments that once might have been spoken with impunity behind closed doors can be picked up by a cell phone camera or amplified on Twitter for the world to hear and judge. Some worry about so-called cancel culture, about careers ended or lives ruined by a single mistake, and surely there are dangers of scapegoating individuals, especially those who weren't already public figures, for an egregious moment while letting the society itself that gave rise to whatever those individuals might have done or said off the hook. But actions also have consequences and especially in the case of those who already famous or powerful, offensive talk or offensive behavior rightly offends us, and we need to keep our ability to be offended sharp rather than letting it atrophy.

But who would be offended by Jesus?

“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” Jesus says, and we might think that's a bit of a low bar. How about blessed is anyone who follows me, who patterns their life after me, who becomes my disciple? Just not being offended by Jesus doesn't seem too hard.

He says this in response to John's disciples who have come, essentially, to put him on the spot. John the Baptist, the great forerunner, the one who foretold a Messiah to come, had been baptizing people in the Jordan for forgiveness of sins when Jesus came to him and asked to be baptized in turn. “I need to be baptized by you, why are you coming to me?” said John as he recognized that here was the one he had longed for and foretold.

So John had put his stake in the ground, had clearly identified Jesus as the great one he'd been talking about when he said, "The one who is coming is greater than I am; I'm not good enough to tie his shoes for him. He's coming with an ax to cut down all the trees that don't bear fruit. He's coming to bring God's wrath on evildoers. He's coming to burn the sinners with unquenchable fire."

You can see why John tended to give people offense. And indeed John's consistent pattern of calling out corruption where he saw it would lead King Herod to put him in prison. Here John sits, incarcerated, his career as a prophet at a halt, soon to face the end of his own life at the hands of Herod's executioner. And his thoughts have turned to his successor, the one he's counted on to carry his mission forward, the one he's passed the torch to, so to speak—the torch of unquenchable fire, that is.

And what is Jesus doing? Is he stirring up a revolt against Herod? Is he gathering an army of angels to drive out the oppressors from the land? No. Instead it seems the person John has put his hopes on is going around a small corner of Galilee doing some very nice healings and proclaiming some very nice good news to the poor. It's all good. But it seem to be coming less with a bang and more with a whimper. Which perhaps gives John some degree of disappointment; or disillusionment; or even perhaps offense. Here he has spent his life and given his life to call out evil and declare God's wrath against injustice. And here comes his designated successor wandering around the countryside gathering a little band of ragtag followers to eat and drink with sinners. It may not seem like much of a beginning. So John asks the question: are you going to get off the dime and be the Messiah or what?

It's interesting that Jesus tells the crowd that John is both more important than anyone else who's ever been born, and less important than the least important person in the kingdom of heaven. In one breath he praises John; in the next he puts him in his proper place. I think we need to not lose sight of Jesus' praise for John, though. Because John the Baptist is the ultimate preacher of God's commands. There's a stark and terrifying truth about God that we as human beings have to come to terms with. God is holy. In fact God is what it means to be holy. God is good—in fact God is what it means to be good. And out of that holiness and goodness, God is pleased when we act in some ways. And God is saddened and angered when we act in other ways. In fact, God is offended. When some feast while others starve, God is offended. When some sleep in mansions while others sleep on the streets, God is offended. Many of us might prefer a cozy God who winks at our failings. John yanks away any gauzy sentimentality we might have about God. Change your lives, he says to God's people: live the way God wants you to live ... or else.

And it might be that *or else* that shows what John still lacks. For John it means or else the unquenchable fire. Not for Jesus. In Jesus we see both God's perfect commandments and God's never-failing mercy all in one. Jesus doesn't wink at sin. He calls out injustice. And yet his response to it is not to torture his enemies into submission but to win them over through undefeatable love.

If Advent tells us anything, it's that the Jesus who will come again in glory is the same Jesus who came the first time. The same holiness. The same goodness. And the same mercy. This is the one who chose not to be born in a palace, but in a manger: to parents who weren't important enough to get a room at the inn. He

chose to ride into Jerusalem not in a chariot to be crowned, but on a donkey to be executed. He chose not to destroy those who killed him, but to destroy death itself.

“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me,” says Jesus. May we never be offended by a God who is more merciful than we are. And at his coming, may we not cower, but rejoice.