

“Dying to Be Born”
Based on Malachi 3:1-7 and Luke 3:1-6
Rev. Dr. Nicole W. Duran

Advent begins with hope, and leads us through love, joy, and peace and finally to the birth of Jesus. We go through this range of emotions one at a time in our worship over the next month, giving ourselves time to savor each one, since each one is a part of the experience that Christmas brings. It's too much to process all in one day, or all in one night in the Christmas eve service. So we sort it out. I remember in my introduction to physical science class in junior high, we did that experiment where you write in black marker on a piece of filter paper, and you stick one end of the filter paper in water, and as the water is absorbed up through the filter paper, it separates out a whole rainbow of colors that were hidden in that one black stripe. There's blue, green, yellow—who knew that all those colors were hidden in that one dull black? That's how Advent is meant to work. There's so much packed into the night and day of Christmas Eve and Christmas—it's too much to taken in all in one 24-hour period. So we give ourselves a month to begin processing what it's all about. And we separate out, like the colors in the experiement-- the blue hope, the red love, the bright yellow joy, the sweet green of peace. And we savor them, one by one. You might call it doing Christmas mindfully. Slowing it down, taking it in, and so appreciating it all the more.

This Sunday, with the beginning of Advent, the beginning of a new church year, and with the renewal of our baptism, we begin our lives again, and we begin our life together as a church again. We returning to our beginnings in the faith to make sure we remember why we're here and to straighten out our wheels and make sure we are on the right track, preparing the way of the Lord.

In baptism, in our beginnings and re-beginnings, God cleans us. That sounds lovely, like taking a nice warm bath. But God is not always gentle in the cleaning process. Some of you may remember baths at the hands of mothers who were more interested in making you sparkle than they were interested in making the experience a fun one for you. For God as well, sometimes scrubbing is necessary, sometimes we may feel that we are not being cleaned, but being drowned. In Jesus' time, when John the Baptist was dunking people into the Jordan river for their sins, it must have been a frightening experience. Going under the muddy water three times, at the hands of a wild man like John—the guy ate locusts and wore camel skin for clothes—who knew what he would do once he got hold of you? Could those folks have felt absolutely certain that they would in then end be allowed to breathe air again?

Paul talks about Baptism as dying to the world, being crucified with Christ, and being born again. We've lost some of that sense along the way. Yes, it usually makes the baby cry, but we grownups understand that that little bit of water on the baby's head—or even the great deal of water, as when Pastor Mike baptized Emma and Cameron—we grownups still understand that that much water, though it may be cold enough and shocking enough to make the baby wail, really isn't a threat to that little life. For us baptism tends to be a celebration of the birth, a welcoming of the new life into our church

family, and an offering up of the child's life to God's protection and blessing. No wonder Sue Lorentz wished we could have more of them!

In the middle ages, way back before there were Presbyterians or any kind of Protestants, Christian thinkers trying to figure out how God cleanses us from sin came up with the idea of purgatory. Even though it's not a part of the Presbyterian church, and we barely know what it is, let alone believe in it, still purgatory is an interesting idea. The idea is that really bad, unrepentant sinners go directly to hell when they die. Really wonderful, saintly folks go directly to heaven. But the rest of us, who have some sins that we might have forgotten to repent or something—we're in this middle category. We're baptized Christians and not exactly unrepentant sinners, so according to the medieval church, we are going to go to heaven. But first we might have to be cleansed. The process of being cleansed from our sins was that you had to finally face all the things your sins have done. You had to look over your own life, and really see what was wrong with your own wrongdoing. Scary thought.

There's a famous passage in the book, *Heart of Darkness*, at the end, when the main character, as he is dying, finally realizes all the evil he's done to other people. It hits him or it is shown to him somehow, as if he were looking at someone else's life, only he realizes that he is responsible for all this evil, for a great deal of human suffering. His last words are, "The horror, the horror!"

Seeing the bad in what we've done is painful. It's a part of getting clean, but it's a lot like dying. Getting clean, clean enough for heaven according to the ancient church, was like passing through fire—but the fire was not meant to punish you, but to clean you. To purify you, like the refiner's fire purifies gold. That's what was supposed to happen in purgatory.

Before we start to celebrate—before we get even to the hope of Advent, let alone to the love, the joy, and the peace—we are called to repent. It's the toughest thing, maybe the only really tough thing, about being a Christian—that we are asked over and over again to face up to what we've done wrong, to turn away from that path, and to turn towards God. Symbolically, this was done for us when we were babies. We were brought to church, we were lifted up, and we were cleansed from our sins. Baptism only happens once in a lifetime—once you are a part of the body of Christ, you are here to stay, and you never need to go through that process of drowning and rising again. But repentance is not a once in a lifetime shot. Repentance happens again and again, and each time, that part of us that is gone astray returns to our baptism to be drowned, and the part of us that longs for God returns to our baptism to be made new.

I heard recently some facts about baby chicks still in the egg. Apparently, an unhatched chick is happy to hang out in the egg, absorbing all the nutrients from the fluid in there, nice and warm and safe. The chick is inclined to stay there forever. Eventually, though, the baby chick grows enough inside that eggshell that there are no more nutrients left there—nothing for it to eat. In fact, as the chick grows, they take in the good stuff from the egg, and as they process the food, the chick gives out poisonous gases that are trapped

inside the shell. So at a certain point, not only is the chick going to starve if it stays in there, it's also going to suffocate. There comes a day when the chick feels—a) I'm hungry and b) I can't breathe. And it is no longer content with lying there and taking things in. Instead it feels a great urgency—I've got to get out of here now or I will die. It is, as the person explaining this to me put it, dying to be born.

I wonder if our church, or if the Protestant church in general has reached this point yet. We were happy to come to church and have our hour of quiet time with God, we have been happy to sit back and absorb the good stuff God provided for us. But it may be that we have been gradually eating up that good stuff, without making more. And as we sit back and let our religion wash over us, by not breaking out of our shell, by not actively seeking new life and new ways of serving God, we may be gradually allowing ourselves to be suffocated here. If we feel that what used to feed us here no longer does, if we feel that the sweet sweet air in this place we used to breathe has turned to poison, maybe it's not that we need to leave the church or even leave this church, but maybe it is that, like that chick, we are dying to be born. Maybe like that baby chick, we can find a way to break out of what we have been, and to be born again, to a whole other life, a whole other way of being the church, as different from the old way as a full grown chicken's life is different from the life of the unhatched chick. Maybe if, through renewing our baptisms this morning, we can break through that almost-drowning water, and come up again to life that is cleansed and purified, maybe then we can find a way, as the body of Christ to embrace the life that the birth of Jesus brings.

The hope of baptism and the hope of this first Sunday in Advent is the hope for new life, a whole different kind of life, for each of us, and for all of us. Amen.