

*A sermon given on Sunday, December 4, 2011
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

Circles and Cycles

Each year at my house there is the battle of the Wreath and the Log.

When I was growing up the central Advent symbol in the Gates home was a 15-inch length of birch, brought from the family cabin in Minnesota's north woods. It was drilled with five holes and graced with a row of four purple candles, a taller white one in the middle of the row. In my adult years I got my own birch log, and promoted the custom. But often we end up with the more familiar evergreen Advent wreath. The greens speak of life and growth; the circle symbolizes eternity; and the round shape, sitting in the middle of our dining room table, draws us together in a symbol of unity. Besides, the Advent wreath is simply more traditional than the Advent log, and Christmas is all about tradition.

Our lives are full of circles and cycles. Advent launches us once more into the liturgical cycle of the church year. Holiday traditions invite us to repeat over and over again familiar activities that define us. Sacred rituals, like lighting the wreath. Secular rituals, like watching the Grinch stuff that tree up the chimney one more time. All of these, in their cyclical repetition, give us some sense of identity, some comfort or feeling of stability.

But not all circles and cycles are good. In some places, including that land we call Holy, there are unholy, seemingly endless cycles of violence and retaliation. Around the world, from sub-Saharan Africa to neighborhoods not so very far from here, poverty and malnutrition are also cycles. We are bound to say that there are some circles and cycles which unite us and keep us grounded. And there are other circles and cycles which draw us into spirals of conflict and futility.

John the Baptist knew about both sorts of cycles.

We think of John as unconventional – with his camel hair clothing, his locust breath, and his penchant for hanging out in the wilderness. But John is actually quite conventional in his own way. His clothing, his appearance, and his wilderness habitat – these are in direct line with the tradition of Hebrew prophets, especially Elijah. Setting out to be a prophet, John puts on the very traditional prophet's uniform.

Furthermore the ritual which he performs in the Jordan River is a standard Jewish rite of purification, perfectly familiar to the first-century Jew. In the Gospel reading, we hear that people come in droves from all over the countryside and from the city of Jerusalem to be baptized by John. They come to acknowledge their sins, their own cycles of brokenness and separation, and to have a ritual cleansing that represents their determination to start afresh. They come for a ritual cycle of cleansing, to repent and break out of their own cycles of brokenness.

Life-giving patterns, and life-draining patterns. Healthy circles, and vicious circles. Cycles of tradition, and cycles of perdition. I expect that all of us have some of each. And maybe Advent is the time for the greatest juxtaposition of both. At few other times are we apt to have so much tradition – family and community rituals which we enact with reverence: opening the daily Advent calendar; putting up the tree; going to the Advent Dessert Theater, or Lessons

& Carols; sending out cards to loved ones; packaging a gift for the needy; playing our favorite seasonal music. These annual repetitions become old friends, sources of peace.

It's equally true that few other times draw us into so many negative cycles. Family pain gets more acute at a time when the happy family ideal is everywhere portrayed. Perhaps we dredge up memories of past holidays gone wrong. Perhaps friendships become strained as, in our stress, we tote up score cards of perceived slights. Perhaps we are encouraged in patterns of excess eating or drinking, masking our abuse with the excuse of harmless holiday indulgence. And then, perhaps, we are drawn inexorably into the vicious cycle known as consumerism.

Advent sermons inveighing against consumerism are familiar, cliché even. But I think there's a particular edge to our commercial frenzy in the past couple of years. It's been given a handy rationalization. We are told it will be good for the economy – and so unbridled consumption becomes virtually a charitable act, and certainly a patriotic one. But as columnist Anna Quindlen has put it:

If the economy is built on persuading people to ... replace the three-disc CD player with the six-disc version, then it's the system, not the shopper, that's to blame in the event of a collapse. Right now there are many charities hurting just as much as retailers and with a more important product to sell: help for children who aren't eating regularly or have serious illnesses; succor for old people who don't have heat or companionship; solace for men and women who are homeless or trying to kick their addictions. Is there really any choice between alleviating pain and choosing novelty pajamas? The holidays should be a time to honor our best values, not a time to muffle them in layers of stuff. [*Newsweek*, 12/3/01, p. 76]

So, here it is: in a season filled both with cycles of faith and cycles of frenzy, John the Baptist stands on our path and points to both sorts of patterns in our own lives – the meaningful cycles and the vicious ones. John invites us to find deep meaning in ritual and convention, as he did with those who came to him at the river Jordan. He calls us to practice and to cherish those acts that give meaning to our lives. But John also challenges us brutally to reject those patterns in our lives which are destructive to ourselves and others. Repent! Cut it out! Make a change!

I have set myself an Advent discipline for this week. Perhaps you will join me. How about throwing yourself fully into one of your favorite annual rituals this week. Putting candles in the window, or baking your grandmother's Christmas cookies – whatever it is – close that circle again with a particular awareness of gratitude and joy. And how about identifying one vicious cycle in your life – something that needs to end – and renewing your determination to do so.

As G.K. Chesterton wrote, “[The] cross, in fact as well as figure, does really stand for the idea of breaking out of the circle [of futility.] [Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, p. 134] That's repentance. That's what the Cross enables. That's what John the Baptist proclaims.

So cherish the good cycles, and break out of the bad ones. As luck and the lectionary would have it, John the Baptist will be back again next Sunday to see how we're doing!

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, by the power of the Holy Spirit. [Rom. 15:13]