

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

The Third Sunday in Advent, Year B

December 11, 2011

*Where Are You Today?* (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28)

Howard Bowlin+

I was out doing a little Christmas shopping the other day. The stores that I visited were all crowded and all the sales registers were busy. It looked to me as if many merchants in our community are going to be pleased with their holiday sales numbers. They will know for sure when the seasonal madness dies down and they can take inventory of the remaining stock.

Taking inventory is, I am told by friends in the retail trades, the only way to know for sure how well a business is doing. Taking an inventory is the way to tell which items are winners and which are duds.

There's such a thing as taking a personal inventory as well. If you were to ask a person who is in successful recovery from some sort of addiction, he or she would tell you that taking "a searching and fearless moral inventory" is absolutely essential to the maintaining of a healthy, happy, and productive life of service to others.

I am reminded of the subject of inventory on this, the Third Sunday in Advent. Today marks the halfway point between the beginning of Advent and its culmination in the great Feast of the Incarnation—Christmas Day. As I reflect on the meaning of the seasons of Advent and Christmas, I find myself asking an inventory sort of question, "Where are you today?" It is the same sort of question that is put to John the Baptist in today's Gospel lesson.

The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem has sent a deputation to John to find out who he is. John at first answers them not by telling them who he is, but rather he tells them who he is not. It takes a lot of personal inventory to tell someone what and who you are not.

It also takes a great deal of humility. That kind of humble self-knowledge does not just appear magically out of the atmosphere. It takes time, and prayer, and reflection. It takes not just talking to God, but also waiting and listening for God's answer. It often takes having another person with whom we can feel free to discuss and reflect on our prayer lives, together and without fear of our being judged.

And what is the goal of this prayer, reflection, and spiritual friendship? Again, we may look to the example of John the Baptist for a clue. When the crowd asks him for the fourth time, "Who are you?" his answer is that he is not the one for whom they have been waiting. In humility he answers that he is among them to prepare the way for the One who is yet to come, the Messiah, the Christ.

In Saint Luke's version of this same story, the manner of preparing the way for the coming Christ is spelled out in graphic detail: the people are to repent their present lifestyles. They are to share their clothes and their food. They are not to extort material things from each other or to accuse each other falsely. These are things for us to keep in mind as well as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the One who became human, born of the Virgin Mary, for us and for our salvation. This is what Advent is really about. This is who you and I are called to be in the midst of it.

An article in a journal on preaching a few Advents ago put it this way: “All of today's readings paint a picture of the coming kingdom, one we expectantly await in this season. It is a kingdom where injustices are undone, where very different people . . . learn to live peacefully together. . . . The salvation anticipated is a new creation, cosmic in its stretches: a new heaven and a new earth. This salvation will be witnessed in communities where mutual respect, love, encouragement and openness are the ruling laws. This salvation is one in which God is power and in which we readily cede preference to others, give up the power games, bearing witness to the other, confessing that salvation is freedom from the need to tear others down in order to build ourselves up.”<sup>1</sup>

I invite you to take a look at where you are in your life today. Has the false god of materialism taken over in your life? Jeffrey Blume, a self-described “recovering materialist,” has offered a checklist of nine questions to help with identifying such behavior:

1. *Do you hate yourself?* Our emphasis on money and success has given us a lot of ammunition for self-criticism when we don't meet our expectations or the expectations of others.

2. *Do you check labels?* Is it more important whether the item is made by the right designer and comes from the right store than whether it is made of good quality?

3. *Are you embarrassed because of your possessions and/or background?* Do you know yourself well enough to understand that your worth before God, the worth that is of ultimate importance in the long run, has absolutely nothing to do with what you do or do not have?

4. *Are you afraid of people who have less than you?* Do you avoid people whose appearance obviously identifies them as persons in poverty and distress?

5. *Do you hide behind material masks?* Do you use possessions to camouflage a bankrupt emotional and spiritual life?

6. *Do you fantasize about showing everyone up by becoming rich and famous?* That may be of interest to the Kardashians, but not to Christ.

7. *Do you ask yourself, “But will it sell?”* Do you lower your standards in order to achieve success?

8. *Do you use people to get ahead?* There is an old saying, “Love people and use things; not love things and use people.”

9. *Do you think of yourself as a résumé?*<sup>2</sup>

No one, I think, is totally immune from the lures of Madison Avenue. I'm not. That is why I think that it is so important to take some time during Advent to get our heads turned back around in anticipation of receiving the one whom God sends to create us anew in our relationship with God and one another. That is why it is appropriate to take some time out for a personal inventory, asking ourselves, “Where am I today?”

A well-known Indian leader of meditation workshops tells a story from his own life. “In San Francisco,” he writes, “when my wife and I had business to do in one of those massive old office buildings from the '30s I was introduced to another marvel of American technology: the revolving door. This particular building had a big, heavy glass door that

---

<sup>1</sup>*Homily Service* (December 1990), 29.

<sup>2</sup>*Living with Spirit in a Material World* (Fawcett, 1988).

carried a lot of momentum, and once I got in, I couldn't get out. Every time I neared an opening, the door would slap up behind me and push me past; and the harder I pushed to get around to try again, the faster I was pushed around. I thought I was going to be trapped there permanently. That is the feeling: you just can't stop; you have to keep going round and round.

"Seeing I was in trouble, my wife called out, 'All you have to do is stop.'

"I stopped, the door stopped, and I was free.

"That is what happens when the senses get out of control. The revolving door keeps hitting us from behind—slap, slap, slap, slap—and we keep running faster and faster, not realizing that the faster we go, the more we will be urged to go even faster. In order to get out of the trap, we have to slow down the thinking process so as to get control of it."<sup>3</sup>

Are we caught in that revolving door? I invite us all, in the midst of our busy Christmas schedules, in whatever way that works best for us, to take some extra time for prayer and personal reflection. Where are you today? You won't know if you don't take your inventory.

---

<sup>3</sup>Ekhnath Easwaran, *Take Your Time: Finding Balance in a Hurried World*, (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1991), 132.