

Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2004
Frank Johnson

Taking Back Jesus

I. The ethical task of a former pastor is to get out of the way, if not out of town completely at least with a low profile. Anne called me the most invisible ex-pastor she has known. And yet more recently she put me in my place when I expressed reluctance to appear in a public role (the Just Peace Reflection), and said, "Get over it, Frank; you're nobody around here any more." It's nice to know who I am! Perhaps I took too seriously my vow of invisibility when I missed our building dedication in September and then last week I was gone for Anne's farewell Sunday. And even today I have to leave at 11:30 to get to a Pilgrim Pines meeting in Woodland Hills.

Of all the stained glass in the cathedral at Chartres, both a sight of incredible beauty and an essential biblical teaching tool for non-Latin reading Christians eight hundred years ago, one of the most impressive is the Jesse tree window. It starts with the root (Jesse) at the bottom, and then shows David, Jesse's son, and goes all the way up with Christ at the top, as Jesus was one of David's descendants. This gets us into today's Advent scripture.

II. Isaiah speaks of a shoot from the stump of Jesse, thus supplying the artist with the metaphor of the tree. The branch that shall grow out of the roots shall have a spirit of wisdom and understanding. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, and the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of Yahweh. A vision of peace, a vision of justice, a vision of shalom. It is Advent. God is coming.

In the Gospel lesson, John the Baptizer is doing his baptizing thing, and then he says that there is someone coming after him whose shoelaces he is not worthy of tying. I baptize with water, John says; he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Filled with the knowledge of Yahweh; God is coming! He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit; God is coming. The Gospel of John puts it this way: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word made flesh; God is coming!

III. Being parents of a high school teacher (and Fran having taught for many years), we get turned on to some of the TV shows that high school kids watch. It's surprising how many teenage soaps there are on the WB: Seventh Heaven (which we started watching because Marilyn was in the first episode), Everwood, One Tree Hill, and there are some others that we haven't watched. But there is one, on CBS, that is different: Joan of Arcadia. We have noticed that people our age watch this show. Joan is a high school student to whom God appears (like the original Joan of Arc who heard God's voice), sometimes in the form of a gardener, sometimes a nurse, sometimes a homeless person. The song that plays while the credits are running is "What if God were one of us?" God gives Joan tasks to perform that usually involve her in helping some person or a situation at her school or in her family. What if God were one of us? God speaks to us in everyday guises. The Word made flesh. God is coming!

Last month Chip Murray, the long time (27 years) pastor of the First AME church in downtown Los Angeles, retired. It was written up in the Times. At his farewell celebration Murray said that the church has to come out from inside the walls, as he spoke of the church's work with low cost housing and jobs for the unemployed. The church is more than prayer and worship, he said, the word has to become flesh. Outside of the walls (we say take it to the streets). The word has to be made flesh. God speaks to us in everyday guises. God is coming!

IV. At the November meeting of the Just Peace Committee, Billie brought us an article by the United Church of Christ's Bernice Powell Jackson, who was writing on Moral Values as part of the ongoing discussion of issues that figured in last month's election. She maintains that we do need to talk about moral values, and we need to be able to talk about how our faith informs what we say and do and how it relates to public policy. She says that we must take back Jesus, and learn to speak about what Jesus means to us, what he taught and how he behaved.

"The Jesus I am talking about is the one who turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. The Jesus I am talking about said at the beginning of his ministry, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.' The Jesus I am talking about said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God.' The Jesus I am talking about said, 'You have heard it said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' The Jesus I am talking about said, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' The Jesus I am talking about never said one word about homosexuality. The Jesus I am talking about ate with the sinners, the outcasts and the tax collectors. He drew to himself those who were marginalized by those in the faith - the women, the children, the lepers, the unclean."

Taking back Jesus. So that each of us could write a paragraph about "the Jesus I am talking about." To help us do that the Just Peace Committee is organizing a Bible study on Jesus to be held during Lent. Lots of good soup. Lots of questions. Lots of exploration. Lots of prayer. Taking back Jesus. The Word becoming flesh. God is coming!

V. Actually, we may have a challenge to see what we can do to take back Jesus long before we get to that Bible study. Readers of the newspapers and watchers of TV news already know that two of the major networks have refused to air the God Is Still Speaking commercials, commercials that we have seen in this room, commercials that speak to our faith in Jesus and his extravagant welcome, that are scheduled to be broadcast this month.

It may be appropriate for the God Is Still Speaking team that first heard the commercials at Woodland Hills in October, to gather with other interested folks and strategize about how we might respond to the networks' refusal. There is email communication from Jane Heckles, and an opportunity to sign an online petition urging the networks to change their minds, which I will forward to anyone who asks for it by email. Anne, bless her heart, has kept us informed, and Joy has been passing the word along as well. Please know that the commercials are being aired on cable.

It seems that there are at least three levels of response that we might consider. The first is the response to the networks themselves as I have just mentioned. The second is to be prepared to respond to the community, first to be ready to welcome those who become aware of us through this advertising and second to think through what response we might make to negative reactions that may come our way, a response in keeping with the spirit of the Jesus we are being called to take back. And the third, and the most important response in the long run, is to live out our welcome, Jesus' extravagant welcome. We may be discovering that a vote to become open and affirming is only the first step. It may even be that we, like Joan of Arcadia, are finding in the networks a most unlikely manifestation of God, who will challenge us to take this new public knowledge about the United Church - of Christ -- and that means us -- outside these walls, and to live out both Jesus' welcome and his challenge to love our enemies. That may be how God is Still Speaking. How the Word becomes flesh. And how when we take back Jesus we may be on a ride that will surprise us all. It is Advent. God is coming. Amen.