

Two different versions of the Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite opened earlier this week. "A Christmas Carol" is playing at A.C.T. in Seattle, and the Burien Actors Theater is presenting "an irreverent look at the holidays" called the "Ultimate Christmas Show." TV has already aired "A Charlie Brown Christmas," "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas," "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" and even "Olive, the Other Reindeer" at least a couple of times.

But here, in the midst of all that mirth and levity, we get a cranky, wild-eyed holy man who lives in the desert—a terrifying place for first century Middle Easterners. And when two groups of Jews make the dangerous journey to come to John for baptism, he insults them—and make no mistake about it, this is a doozy of an insult! Then he preaches repentance and threatens them with fire. Who wouldn't want to go to a play or the ballet or something else instead of this? What's the good word here? Where is the joy?

Well, it's here, I promise. But to see it, we need to scrape off a few theological barnacles because there's a gleaming little gem in the Celtic roots of our Anglican heritage that offers a rare and gorgeous way to think about "repentance."

You see, our Celtic grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith lived at what was considered the edge of the inhabitable world when Christianity came to what are now the British Isles sometime in the late first or early second century. So they were far more at home with wild places like the Judean desert, where they expected to find something of the wildness of God.

One of these ancestors was a 4th c. Celtic monk named Pelagius. He was Britain's earliest theological writer who insisted, like the Wisdom tradition from Hebrew scripture and the Gospel of John, that God's love, wisdom and image are planted in the depths of human nature. Pelagius said that sin buries the beauty of God's eternal image within us, but cannot erase it. The gift of God's *grace* restores the essential wholeness of the gift of our deepest *nature*. Christ liberates us by showing us God's self and our own true self.

Now, when the Roman Empire left Britain, the Celtic church and the Roman church were separated for 200 years. Rome pursued an emphasis on predestination for some and a totally fallen human nature for all. But the Celts took the mysticism of St. John to heart, emphasizing Christ as the "light of life" that shines from the eyes of every living creature, even if it has not been consciously detected or made visibly manifest in our lives.

In later years, Reformationists, Lutherans and Calvinists in Britain nearly repressed the Celtic tradition largely because of this theological difference. In this country, American Protestants gave rise to a form of repentance that seems

to involve listing all our misdeeds and quivering in fear before an angry, violent God who demands our grief, sorrow and shame.

Now, I don't know why people create images of God that only seem to make them miserable. Maybe that's what led other people to create a version for those who find talk of sin and redemption either unsavory or just sort of quaint and passé—a sort of “repentance light.” This version of repentance involves feeling sorry for one's personal sins and then apologizing to God. Or maybe if you're really and truly sorry, you promise never to do it – whatever “it” is – again.

Remorse and apology are appropriate responses when we recognize having gone off the mark. But there is a purpose for true repentance that transcends these emotional responses and transfigures us beyond wallowing in guilt or simply expressing regret. From deep in the heart of the early church in Ireland and Scotland, we can reclaim a joyful and intimate understanding of John the Baptizer's cry: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

To repent is to turn around, to reorient one's consciousness, sometimes radically. From a Celtic perspective, repentance is turning to what is planted most deeply within us: the light that cannot be overcome by the darkness. We are not turning to become something that we are not. We turn to become ourselves more truly and more fully—to give birth and voice to who God made us to be.

The fire that John the Baptizer talks about is not the hellfire of damnation, but the fire of God's truth. This is the fire of grace that liberates us by burning away all the falseness within us to reveal the enduring beauty and goodness that lies within every human heart. The fire of God's grace burns away whatever binds us to anything but God. The fire of God's grace burns until it reveals the deepest desire within every human ever created—the desire for God.

No one here is extra. No one here is unneeded. No one here is unloved by God. John the Baptizer, in his own rude way, challenges his listeners not to limit ourselves by our ancestry or to put our trust in earthly positions and powers. The kingdom of heaven is so much larger, and we all have some gift to contribute – some fruit worthy of repentance.

We know things that John the Baptizer did not know, even as he told of the coming of one more powerful than himself. We know that Jesus – through the entire course of his earthly ministry all the way to the cross – Jesus diverted or absorbed violence rather than inflicting it. So we can be confident that the kingdom that Jesus is ushering in does not consist of threshing out bad people with a winnowing fork and burning them.

The axe lying at the root of the trees is not a weapon that God will use to cut us down if we don't behave. Threshing and burning or cutting people down doesn't even clear the path to the kingdom. If anything, that kind of violence only blocks the flow of the kingdom.

The axe is there for you and me to pick up. The axe is there for us to use during this Advent season to clear the deadwood within ourselves. Advent is our opportunity to make room for Christ to be reborn in our own hearts—to make room for the light of Christ seeded in every living creature: *growth* like the shoot that comes out from the stump of Jesse.

God's kingdom is not arriving all at once in some futuristic, bloody war where Terminator Jesus fries all the people we don't like and finally defeats Satan. Our Celtic ancestors would argue that when the kingdom of heaven comes in the fullness of God's time, even the essence of Satan will be redeemed because God created Satan as an angel of light. The fire of God's grace will burn away only Satan's evil, which is not created by God but by Satan's being false to his true nature.

But the kingdom of heaven is also not breaking in through some tamed and domesticated source. Our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith warned us to watch from the wild places, from the margins and from the edges of the inhabitable world. And so it is in those places that we hope to bear fruit worthy of repentance—the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

We hope to bear these not because they earn us anything, but because they are the expressions of the gifts planted deepest within us. They are manifestations of our own desire for God, and they ripen not for us, but for those around us who have come to the edges of the wild places looking for hope.

The church can be a comforting place, a place for healing and for solace. But it is also a desert place where people can take fearless inventories of their lives, examining their fears and anxieties. The church can be a desert place where people come to confront howling winds, thorny brambles and lonely emptiness.

And Advent is our moment to be with people in the wild places of their lives. Not to fix them or to scold them, but to embody the life-giving energy and grace that God promises to all who are willing to turn back to God; to be evidence of God's grace for all who return to give themselves to God, to accept the unquenchable fire of God's truth and love that burns away everything that deceives us or that leads us astray.

Advent is our moment to consider our own habits and practices, to nurture those practices that are bearing fruits worthy of repentance. Advent is also our moment to courageously ask God's help in cutting away those behaviors, addictions and obsessions that are not fruit-bearing. That is how we come to experience repentance as a joyful return to the light of Christ. That is how we prepare to receive and share the grace and glory of God made manifest in a baby born in Bethlehem, the Word made flesh, Emanuel.

Works consulted:

Newell, J. Philip. *The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999.