

Draining the Swamp

Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Lk 12:29-31

'Drain the Swamp!' This slogan, perhaps more than any other, captures Donald Trump's remarkable rise to the presidency. President Trump very wisely understood the spirit of the times, that in the past two decades too much has changed, and too little for the better for many people in this country. I don't know if Trump can drain the swamp, because it's quite murky as to who or what is in his swamp. But I will say this. Many politicians before Trump promised to 'drain the swamp', to little effect. Nancy Pelosi effectively used the slogan to regain Democratic control of the house in 2006. She promised to 'drain the swamp' of lobbyist, but that didn't work out to well. Before her, Ronald Regan promised to 'drain the swamp,' shrinking government of useless bureaucrats. That also seemed to have little lasting effect. All this to say, if we really want to 'drain the swamp,' we shouldn't rely on promises of politicians.

If you really want to see historical examples of 'draining the swamp' you are much better off looking to the prophets than the politicians. The Biblical prophets risked their lives to speak the truth to reform the entrenched powers of their time; as Nathan confronted King David and Elijah, King Ahab. And the last of the great prophets of Scripture was John the Baptist, who over 2000 years ago ran a 'drain the swamp' campaign that was so significant, that we remember it and try to reenact it every year during the season of Advent-which begins today.

'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,' proclaims John the Baptist, or in modern translation, "Change your life. God's kingdom is here." And if you think this is not as edgy as 'drain the swamp,' check out what happens next. When the powerful insiders of the day, the Pharisees and Sadducees, approach John for popular endorsement, he yells in their faces; "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come...Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John the Baptists not only shouted 'drain the swamp,' he shouted it at the snakes. He not only proclaimed clear out the deadwood, he said it to the dead wood and threatened them that they'd be thrown into the fire.

John the Baptist didn't just talk the talk, he walked the walk. Politicians emerge from their penthouses to speak against mixing wealth and politics, John the Baptist challenges corruption from a cave in the desert on a diet of insects and wild honey. Politicians often talk tough when it is popular, but won't stick their neck out if reform costs them their job. The cost of John the Baptist sticking his neck out against King Herod's corruption, was to have his head returned on a plate. Truly John the Baptist and the prophets expose most politicians as pretenders. But even though it is written in Scripture of John the Baptist that "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than he;" alas not even John the Baptist's righteous words and life could 'drain the swamp,' rid the world of its corrupt and violent ways.

The only force great enough to drain the swamp was and is the self-sacrificing love of God Himself for his creatures. This is the Good News, the Avedis of Christ's coming into the world, which John announced and for which we begin to prepare this first Sunday of Advent. And the first step of preparing for Christmas truly could be characterized as 'draining the swamp,' with one important difference. We humans must simply face the hard fact that we have always lived in the swamp, and that the reptiles are us! Therefore, the only way to start emptying the swamp around us, is to empty the swamp within us. This is a daily emptying, humbling of ourselves; that whatever our pride tells us is ours-our looks, our wealth, our power, our health, are on loan from God and are to be given back in service of God and others. As Jesus says in today's reading for the 1st Sunday of Advent, "Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying... Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

For all of us who feel that things aren't going very well in the world or often in our own lives, when we feel we need to drain the swamp and start all over again, the season of Advent is our spiritual calling. Because while the promises of this world to reform itself must always be broken, the promise of Our Lord to reform the heart which is open to him forever stands, and is our great and only hope for real reform-of this world unto the next-now and always; amen.