

“At the Edge of Life”  
Matthew 3:1-12  
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Second Sunday of Advent

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World AIDS Day was this Wednesday, December 1st, and it got me thinking of the AIDS patients I used to know. In 1999 I had the privilege of working as a chaplain at Doorways, an interfaith residence for people living with HIV and AIDS. During my time there, I got to know a number of the residents. There was the friendly older deaf man, with whom I communicated by writing notes back and forth. There was the young woman with cerebral palsy who loved boy bands, especially the Back Street Boys. There was the young man who flirted with me and once told me, “If it wasn’t for this HIV thing, I would whisk you off to Hawaii!” There was the 18-year-old blind mother of two who was unable to care for her children due to her disease. There was the young man who told me upon one of our first meetings about his recent brush with death. There was the former psychologist who had had to quit his profession when he began wasting away from AIDS.

The residents of Doorways came from a variety of backgrounds, had a myriad of personalities, and had varying levels of health. I know that some of the people with whom I worked have since died. Others have improved in health and been able to return to living on their own. *All were different*, having contracted HIV in different ways (I was trained not to ask, but some residents were forthcoming). For some residents, AIDS was just *one aspect* of their lives with which they needed to deal. They were able to face life one day at a time. Others approached their condition *sullenly*, resisted treatment, and treated their doctors and nurses as enemies. In one small house, a wide variety of people lived.

Yet the residents of Doorways had one thing in common: They were all “*at the edge of life*,” faced with an incurable disease that could kill them with little warning. Many of the residents were otherwise healthy, and some had few symptoms of AIDS. Nonetheless -- even if they *never experienced* symptoms -- their lives had been indelibly changed by the diagnosis of HIV. Even those who were physically strong, even those who were in denial, were *at the edge*.

Living “at the edge of life” like that *does something* to a person. If any of you have experienced chronic illness, or if you have been close to someone who has, you know that the possibility of death can cause one to feel the need to tie up any “loose ends” left over from the past. Several residents yearned to reconcile with loved ones from whom they had been long estranged. Some yearned to try things they had never tried before -- “I hope I get a chance to try *this* before I die!” And other residents asked me if I would hear their “confession.” Knowing that they were facing death, and knowing that they had not lived their lives perfectly, they longed to repent. It was as though they could hear John the Baptist speaking to them directly, crying to them, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*” They wanted to prepare for the death they knew may come soon, that seemed sometimes to be just around the corner.

People living with HIV/AIDS are no more in need of repentance than the rest of us... and not *all* the residents of Doorways felt the need to “tie up loose ends” just because they had been diagnosed with HIV. But their constant state of “living at the edge of life” made people living with HIV/AIDS in those days a sort of example for the rest of us. The residents of Doorways -- most of them *under the age of 50* -- knew that they were staring an incurable virus in the face, and even those who didn’t care to admit it knew that this would require certain changes to their lives.

This can be true of any potentially terminal illness, but I see it as especially true with AIDS, due to the stigma that surrounds the disease. Although the situation has improved in recent years, many people living with HIV or AIDS remain the kinds of outcasts for whom Jesus cared so much, thus causing them to be “at the edge of life” more than sufferers of other, less stigmatized conditions. This was true with many of the residents with whom I ministered. They were in a constant state of “Advent,” of preparing for what was to come by repenting of what had already passed.

Isn’t that what the season of Advent is all about? Those of you who were here last week know that during this Advent season, we won’t be seeing much of the pregnant Virgin Mary or the baby Jesus. Instead, we will be talking about preparation: how we prepare for the coming of God into our world. This morning’s lesson from the gospel of Matthew reminds us that such preparation is not just about Christmas carols and waiting for the baby. Like the residents of Doorways, the season of Advent puts us “at the edge of life,” somewhere *in between* the hope of the coming Christ and the reminder of the darkness of life and our own need for repentance. Biblical scholar Douglas Hare writes that it is important to remember this

twofold accent of Advent, lest our concentration on the Christmas baby become empty sentimentality void of awe. We must not speak of God's love coming down at Christmas without remembering that the divine love is fierce in its judgment of those who resist love's demands.<sup>1</sup>

John the Baptist's words in Matthew speak sharply in that regard. He names the hope of the coming Christ: "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals." He names the *fierceness* of that coming Christ also, with language about the "brood of vipers" to whom he speaks, and "unquenchable fire"; *frightening* images that don't quite go along with the "Madonna and child" to which we are accustomed. But *these, too*, are images of the coming Christ.

It is my strong belief that people living with HIV and AIDS are no more sinful than the rest of us. However, that is not necessarily saying much. Each of us, when we are honest with ourselves, know that we have done things of which God would not be proud, and which are not befitting of the incarnation of God into our world. People living with chronic illness, or near death, are perhaps more aware of this than the rest of us, because they are at a point at which life takes on a certain sharpness. But during the season of Advent we can all *walk to that edge of life*, take a look at the life that we have lived, and prepare to repent of those things we have done that we know were not of God. We can prepare for baptism by the coming Christ. We can become aware, amidst the unending grace of God, that *we, too*, are occasionally worthy of being called a brood of vipers.

You may choose not to confess your sins before me or before any human being. You may decide that it is most meaningful for you to do so silently, alone with God. But do, in the midst of all the hustle and bustle of "the holiday season" remember John the Baptist's message of repentance. As you feel overwhelmed with the craziness of "this season," as we have come to know it, remember to "walk to the edge of life." Remember, as you place that baby Jesus in your Nativity scene once more, that this is not *only* a season of light; it is a season of darkness too. Remember that the baby in the manger is also the One who died on the cross. And remember, you brood of vipers that is loved by God, to pray.

*Now let us pray.*

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, Matthew (Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993) 20.