

“If a Prophet Cries Out in the Wilderness and No One is There to Hear Him...”

Based on Matthew 3: 1-12

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There are probably a lot of sermon topics which people don't particularly want to hear at Christmas time. Two such topics are: repentance and stewardship. And guess what? We're getting both today! Here we are, the Second Sunday of Advent and our lectionary gift is once again John the Baptist with his unique style of evangelism. Oddly, one that I have not taken as a model of ministry. Somehow I don't think it would be particularly successful in our time and place: crying out in the wilderness and then when some followers do happen to come around berating them by calling them a brood of vipers. John the Baptist was only a few months older than Jesus so his crying out in the wilderness was not to prophesy Jesus' birth but his ministry as an adult. Some people, even pastors and Biblical scholars, find it odd that as we near the celebration of the birth of the infant Jesus, that we would focus on John the Baptist's prophecy about the coming of the adult Jesus. But for some reason, this text has been chosen for Advent. For some reason, the planners of the lectionary thought that during Advent, a text about repentance, bearing good fruit worthy of repentance and preparing the way for the Lord are appropriate for Advent. The key here is the preparation. Preparing ourselves spiritually for the birth of Jesus is not all that different from preparing for the sacrifice death and resurrection of Christ. To prepare to welcome Christ into our hearts and into our lives, whether Christ incarnate in the birth of a baby or Christ resurrected after crucifixion, requires prayerful examination of our lives and repentance.

Our passage begins with John the Baptist, clad in pauper's clothing of camel's hair and eating a pauper's diet of locusts and wild honey. John's calling out "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And I can't help but wonder, who is he crying out to? If a prophet cries out in the wilderness and there is no one there to hear him, does he make a sound? The crying out in the wilderness seems futile. Why didn't he cry out in a city or at least a town where people could hear? For one, the wilderness is important because of the history of the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years after God delivered them from enslavement in Egypt and before their settling in the Promised Land. The wilderness was a place of great joy but also a place of trials and temptation. We remember that big things, important things, happen between God and God's people in the wilderness. But there's another reason for John to be in the wilderness and not the city. All authority, political, military and most importantly, religious, is in the city. John's location in the wilderness and not the city sets him up as being outside the official religious system and able to preach against it. John offers a way to forgiveness that circumvents the Temple (and the authority for the Pharisees and Sadducees). People come to him, confess and repent, are baptized and forgiven rather than going through the Temple. And to make matters worse, he says that it's not enough to be a descendant of Abraham, you have to *do* something in order to escape judgment. It's not just a matter of who are but what you do that matters.

The gospel writer tells us, that John “is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”’ Now, in the original Greek manuscripts of the scriptures, there was no punctuation so modern translators, have to make their best guesses as to what the punctuation should be. In most cases, it’s pretty easy and or doesn’t make a difference but here there’s an interesting situation. It could either be “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: **‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’**” Or it could be “The voice of one crying: **‘In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.’**” The difference is whether “in the wilderness” is where the crying out is happening or is the wilderness where the preparing the way for the Lord should be happening. As one scholar notes, “The text of Isaiah suggests the latter reading so that it is in the wilderness where ‘the highway of our God’ is to be paved.”¹

The wilderness is where the highway of our God is to be paved. But where is the wilderness? John was in the wilderness of Judea but where is our wilderness? Do we have to leave populated areas in order to prepare the way of God? I hope not... No, the wilderness is right out there. Just outside the doors of our church. But not only outside the doors of the church. The wilderness is right here. Sitting in the “pews.” Standing at the pulpit. The wilderness is in here [the heart]. It is in here that we face our disappointments and our longings, our failures and our fears, our grief and our loss, our cynicism and our doubts. It is in here that we prepare the way for God and it is in here that we welcome Christ, in the form of a helpless child or in the form a resurrected Messiah.

And John the Baptist tells us one way to prepare. Of course, coming from a man dressed in camel hair and eating locusts, it’s not surprising that John’s way doesn’t have anything to do with gifts to buy or parties to plan. John’s way is to confess and repent. Confess and change our ways. I know, the word “repentance” leaves bad taste in most our mouths. We have a lot of negative connotations that bring up ideas of guilt, judgment and punishment. Theologian John Burgess notes, “Repentance is a confusing concept to many Christians today... What John—and Advent—remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God’s desire to realign us to accord with Christ’s life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God’s power to transform us into Christ’s image.”²

John the Baptist uses some harsh imagery to indicate what’s going to happen to those who don’t repent: an ax for the trees that don’t bear good fruit, a winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff. Both cut down trees and chaff are to burn in an unquenchable fire. The chaff to be burned away is usually thought of as the people—unrepentant and unfaithful—who will be burned away in hell. But it occurs to me that the chaff and the wheat are one and then separated. It seems to me that the chaff is simply that part of each of us that is sinful and useless, the part of each of us that is an

¹ Ben Witherington, Commentary on Gospel Matthew 3:1-12, Lectionary for December 5, 2010, Second Sunday of Advent <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx>

² John P. Burgess, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 46.

obstacle to our relationship with God, the part that keeps us from fully living into our inheritance as beloved children of God made in God's image. Maybe our confession of sin, repentance and request for forgiveness is part of the process of pruning, winnowing and burning away of that which is not beneficial, part of the process of separating our good from our sinful parts and then the burning of the chaff is God's forgiveness and wiping us clean.

Advent and stewardship pledging are both good times to re-examine our priorities and (if necessary) repent. John tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that it's not enough to just be born a child of Abraham. Similarly, it's not enough to simply confess. We are called to confess our sin *and* repent, that is, to change our ways. We are called to turn away from the obstacles to our faith and turn toward God, to prepare the way for Christ. I would like to invite you to see your stewardship pledge as a way to turn toward God. Some of us prefer to think of God and money in different categories. God is God, holy and great. Money is worldly and somehow shouldn't be mixed up with God. But there's no escaping the reality that where and how we spend our money reveals our priorities. If we say that God is our top priority, does our spending reflect that? Is our giving to the church our first priority or our last? Do we consider our giving to the church among our "wants" or our "needs?" Of course, I'm not asking you to sacrifice housing or groceries for your church giving. I'm simply asking to you consider, as a matter between you and God, are you giving as much as you can? And if you consider your church giving a "want" where on that priority list does it fall? Is it at the top of that list or toward the bottom?

In case you're wondering, I don't know who gives what to the church and I don't want to know. And even if I did know, I wouldn't know what percentage of your income your giving reflects. But I do know that this congregation is quite generous with both time and money. It's pretty rare for a church this size to be able to afford a full-time pastor. And all the mission we do is remarkable for the size of this church. So probably, a lot of us are doing as much as we can. But imagine how much more we could do if everyone was really making giving a top priority.

Take a moment to think about your church pledge. Is now a time that you could repent, change your ways and prepare a way for God by increasing your pledge? Maybe you've never been a pledger before and now is a time for you to turn toward God and take that step of pledging. The Biblical definition of tithing is ten percent of your income. My hope is for all of us to be working toward that ten percent. (If there is anyone who pledges more than ten percent, this does not apply to you! Please do not decrease to ten percent!) Let us each consider increasing our pledges by one percent each year until we get there. For most of us, a one percent increase a year will be barely noticeable. Again, if you're living pay check to pay check, obviously you can't pledge ten percent to the church. I ask only that we each pledge what we can and that we each make it a priority. Consider the support of this church a "need" not a "want" in your budget. Remember, if your financial circumstances change, you can always adjust your commitment accordingly.

Preparing the way for the God takes action. Preparing the way for God requires repentance, changing our ways to align ourselves with God. In what way are we preparing for the coming of Christ? In what ways are we making the paths straight? Where are our priorities? In what ways are we working to separate the wheat from the chaff in our own lives, in our own souls?