

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2009

God's word to all humanity came from a wild and wooly man who lived in the deep of the desert, on the fringes of society rather than in its corridors of power, at the periphery rather than at the epicenter. The divine messenger and his message originated in an unlikely place and from an improbable source. John would have been easy to ignore if you expected or wanted something normal, safe, or traditional. But neither John nor his message was normal by any stretch of the imagination. Whereas John's father Zechariah had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple, John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. There he dressed in animal skins, and ate insects and wild honey. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

The prophets have a way of telling it like it is, and John is no exception, as we will see in next week's continuation of this account. Luke uses the words of an earlier prophet, Isaiah, to describe John's dramatic and bold preaching about preparing a way for the Lord, with mountains falling and valleys filled, crooked ways made straight and the rough ways smooth. We can describe the imagery as what happens to mountains as a result of strip mining or building interstate highways. Things will no longer be as they were, and this will come as quite a shock to some.

As Dan Clendenin says: The Biblical prophets do more "forth-telling" about the present than "fore-telling" about the future. Their specialty is prognosis rather than prediction. Prophets discern with unusual clarity the significance of current events and the circumstances of God's people. Based upon their diagnosis, they speak a word from God to provoke people to change. By speaking God's word to our world, prophets call us to radical transformation.

No wonder that God, then, didn't choose one of those "important" people in the seats of power to deliver such a message. And so, Herzog writes, "The Word of God came to a nothing son of a nobody in a godforsaken place."

Perhaps the people were beginning to despair of ever "hearing from God" again. After all, it had been a very long time since there had been a great prophet in Israel, some 450 years since the prophet Malachi. The silence was broken by the voice of John the Baptist in the wilderness.

Marcus Borg writes that John "stood in the charismatic stream of Judaism." When John drew the people of Israel back out to the river Jordan, the boundary their ancestors had crossed hundreds of years before in order to enter the Promised Land, he reminded them that "it was not sufficient to be 'children of Abraham,'" and he "called the Jewish people to a more intense relationship to God sealed by a ritual of initiation." Luke skillfully plays upon the messianic hopes of the Israelites; hearing these words, they would understand John was the voice that was to prepare them to receive the promised redemption spoken of by Isaiah, Baruch and Malachi.

What was the meaning of John's message? We're aware of a common misperception about prophets predicting the future: "A prophecy is not a prediction, it is a warning or a promise," Albert Nolan writes. Both the warning and the promise are conditional. They depend upon the free response of the people of Israel." John's message of both warning and promise is meant "to persuade the people to change or repent. Every prophet appealed for conversion."

"Warning," of course, strikes fear even in our hearts two thousand years later, especially when it concerns things like the judgment of God. "Promise," on the other hand, sounds much better to our ears and hearts, especially as Christmas approaches, but our hearing of the gospel is only partial if we neglect one and focus only on the other. The people's memory of the wilderness is marked by this two-sided experience of God's word in their lives: The wilderness was a frightening and confusing place where God had spoken to God's people in the past and through which God had led God's people to a new and promised life. The wilderness could also be a place of renewal and transformation.

John dressed and spoke like an Old Testament prophet even as he delivered warnings and promises about the coming events of the New Testament. There is the "warning" part of John's message, the part that's harder to read while the world around us is immersed in festivities and fatigue. Where's the good news in a warning of catastrophe from a wilderness prophet long ago?

Leonard Klein warns us of the risk of missing the Advent message of repentance: "It is so tempting to preach about hope in the abstract or to rush Christmas and talk about glad tidings of great joy. The glad tidings are, however, in large part the announcement of forgiveness." "Our era's desire to forget the reality and even the possibility of sin has not liberated or enhanced

human life. It has diminished it. Denial of the gravity of sin leaves people witless and disabled in the face of the world's evils and their own shortcomings unable to understand their predicament, save in terms of the misdoings of others or the randomness of existence. The denial of sin has unleashed despair, confusion, and anger." But there is good news here, nevertheless, for "learning that you are a sinner can be part of the good news. It means knowing what the problem is, knowing that there is a God whom you have offended and to whom you can be reconciled." Again, the glad tidings hold not only the promise of turning things right-side-up, but getting us right with a loving God once more.