

There is a radical living in an encampment down by the river, with some others who are similarly inclined to draw attention to a new way of standing opposed to “things as they are.” No one knows who he is, but it feels as if he is part of a new movement, and people are coming down to his camp to learn more, and even to be baptized. So, a religious delegation is sent down to visit what might be called, “Occupy River Jordan,” to find out who he is, but at that evening’s G.A., (General Assembly) John only answers them in the negative. He told them that he was *not* a prophet, that he was *not* Elijah, and even though they did not ask him this, he told them that he was *not* the Messiah. Finally, though, he did answer in the affirmative. He called himself, “a voice,” a voice of just one, who was crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”

Last week we heard the opening of the Gospel of Mark. This week it is the beginning of the Gospel of John—both of them opening with words about the call for change coming from a radical outsider stepping in from the wilderness to bring good news for all of the people. Yet his message was as strange as his attire and grooming.

It was good news involving repentance, and repentance involved change. That is good news to some people but it is bad news to others.

It was good news for the oppressed, but that was bad news for the oppressors.

It was good news for those who suffered pain, yet it was bad news for those who inflicted pain.

It was good news for the vast majority who were poor in John’s day; people who were waiting to believe that things can change. It was bad news for those few at the top of the pyramid who wanted to maintain the status-quo. The gospel of John begins with the arrival of a wild radical living in a tent campground on the edge of the wilderness by the River Jordan.

Leonard Sweet points out that the wilderness theme that is mentioned in these gospels is extremely important in understanding this text and John’s place in this new exodus. Just as the first Exodus took place in the wilderness this new act also takes place in the wilderness. It appears that the wilderness is not only a place of testing, but is also considered to be a place that can cleanse, purge, and renew.

Martin Luther points out that Jesus came in simplicity, not ostentatiously, to win the world through his life and his teachings rather than with a sword and coercion. Therefore, it was a mere man, an outsider at that, and not an angel who came to prepare the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist was a prophet. Although the prophet’s message is relevant, truthful, and urgent, it is one that the people do not easily receive. We are not particularly fond of people who tell us what is wrong with us. The prophet’s frankness and honesty are more than people ever want to hear. Today, we ignore the prophets, we think of them as strange people. Strange in the sense that they can’t accept the status-quo like the rest of us. Strange in that they are not willing to overlook inconsistencies and injustices as most people are willing to do. There is a tendency to ignore the prophets because they make us feel uncomfortable, and by ignoring them, we hope they will go away. Throughout history we have taken more drastic measures, by stoning the prophets, in hopes of silencing their voices. After the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

and Robert Kennedy, the folk singers sang the ballad which asked, “Where have all of the prophets gone?”

We try, but we cannot silence the voice of the prophet. When one is struck down, another is raised up. Martin Luther King’s voice was silenced, but then Bishop Desmond Tutu’s voice rose up. Today the prophet’s voice is still crying out about inequality, brutality, violence, and a lack of integrity and ethics. The modern prophets are telling us that we must deal with what it is about our society that makes us want to take drugs, to act with violence, and engage in consumerism, racism, sexism classism and homophobia. They are raising questions about how we act as citizens of the world, about the growing divide between haves and have-nots, and how we treat our poor at home and the poor across the world.

Bishop Oscar Romero in South America went so far to refuse to use the phrase “the poor” and used instead the Spanish phrase that translated as “those who are made poor.”

The wild-eyed prophets of today, like the wild-eyed prophet John, tell us to repent, to change how we think about these things, or we will not survive as a nation or as a people.

There are other prophetic voices in our midst that are telling us that we cannot disregard creation, nature, or the environment, for to do so is to destroy human life itself. It has been fifty years since Rachel Carson wrote “Silent Spring.” She told us that if we continued to use pesticides and insecticides, we would wake up some day to a silent spring. The birds would no longer sing, because there would be no birds. Eventually there would be no life, period. She was ridiculed. After these many years she is now held in high esteem and appreciated. Studies have since shown how devastating DDT has been on human and animal life. The world is grateful to her that DDT was finally banned before it could spread further havoc on our planet.

The prophet is the voice of one “crying in the wilderness.” Because of the truthfulness of the prophet’s message, which for the most part is disturbing and upsetting, we have forced him or her into the wilderness. But we know that many of the prophetic voices that have been raised up in our day are right. They are telling us that if we ignore the homeless, the powerless, and the marginal of our day, we do so at our own peril. They are right. But we do not want to be reminded of our moral responsibilities, failures, and shortcomings. We do not want to be reminded that we are responsible for the consequences of our behavior. Therefore, the prophet is crying in the “wilderness” because we have abandoned him or her to the wilderness.

There is a unique relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus was baptized by John not because Jesus needed to repent of his sins, but perhaps rather because Jesus wanted to identify with both John’s message and the people. The only way for Jesus to become one with the people and reveal his love for them was to enter the water and be baptized with them. Jesus felt the need to stand with them on their level. He is with them. He got down in the water with John and the people. In other words, part of the good news of the gospel is that Jesus’ identifies with the people at the level of their need.

In Jesus’ day, 2% of the people held all of the wealth. 3% were scribes or a part of the priestly class. The next 5% owned their own businesses and prospered to one degree or another. The remaining 90% lived in poverty, many with no homes. Though these extremes may be unfair to measure against today’s standards, ours is a model that is shifting to these same biblical proportions, and Jesus was one of the 90%.

Think of the person who is living on \$850 a year. He or she has no car, perhaps a home the size of a backyard tool shed, if a home at all. He or she has no television, radio, or appliances, and is without the benefit of running water or electricity. And that person represents over half of the people of the world. For such people the words of Jesus are good news indeed.

If you can remember this, go home and look up, [www.globalrichlist.com](http://www.globalrichlist.com). You can test my \$850 figure, but you can also enter your own yearly income and prepare to be surprised to see where you fit in on the scale of global wealth.

From the pain of the world to our own, the voice of the prophet both challenges and comforts. In this Advent season, we rediscover hope; we renew the idea that has grown dim during the year that our faith will never abandon us. Emmanuel, or “God is with us.” With us:

- When the cancer biopsy comes back positive, instead of negative.
- When the grade on the exam comes back much lower than you hoped.
- When the scenarios we have laid out for our lives take a different turn.
- When the spouse of however-many-years walks out the door, and doesn’t return.
- When the dream of success in a career is once again downsized and diminished.
- When the late-night long-distance call communicates a death, not a birth.
- When the longing for family harmony is shattered by a shouting match.
- When the desire for companionship is drained by another lonely holiday season.<sup>3</sup>
- When this is the first holiday without a mother, a father, a spouse, a child, a friend.

In all these discouraging, and disillusioning situations, the approaching light of this season is with us.

The good news comes to the brokenhearted, the lonely, and the forgotten.

Think of those among us whose spirit has grown faint. The man who is worried about how he is going to pay his medical expenses. The father who faces the New Year with the possibility he will be unemployed. The single parent mother who can barely drag herself out of bed in the morning because she feels so burnt-out and so used-up. The elderly woman who asks of her pastor when he comes to visit her to pray with her out loud for God to take her. What does the coming birth mean for them? For us?

Listen to the words of the Hebrew Testament lesson for today as the prophet proclaims,

“The spirit of the GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me;...sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

If you want to see the stars on a December night you must get away from the light of the city. You have to go up into the mountains, away from all the artificial light, to where it is very dark. There you will be able to see the fragile light of the stars. It is fragile because there are so many things, such as smog, pollution, and artificial light that can obscure and hide the stars’ beauty.

That light that comes into the world in this season is so fragile that we have to get away from the Santa buzz, the shopping crowds, the lights and the tinsel, and the daily course of things to observe its meaning for us. We need to find that place this Advent where we can be silent, reflective, and prayerful, and wait for the voice in our own inner wilderness to remind us that we are not alone in the radiance of the meaning of this season, and that we too are called like the prophets to show that love. Comfort those who mourn, proclaim liberty to those captive to inner demons or societal injustices, and lift the mantle of praise and joy where it is needed most.

Even John admits that he does not know the nature of what is to come that will bring a new way of being, and we live with that question as well. But to follow the source of those teachings is to model what it means to bring a prophetic voice to our communities and our world.

The message of Advent is one of hope, peace, joy and love in the coming of something new, something better, someone who can change the world over and over again through each one of us. Look for the light of Advent and remember that the light is hope, and that you represent at least one spark of hope for a better world not for some, but for all. AMEN

### ***Sermon Resources***

- 1) John A. Stroman, "A Voice Crying in the Wilderness" (outline)
- 2) <http://www.globalrichlist.com/index.php> punch in your own salary!
- 3) Kennedy, Jon. "A supposedly true Russian Christmas story," Silicon Valley Today, December, 1997

## **Scripture for Sunday, December 11, 2011**

### **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. 10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

### **John 1:6-8, 19-28**

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said. 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27 the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." 28 This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.