

SERMON: "A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS"

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"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance."

Whew, that's not exactly your average cheery "Merry Christmas" or even "Happy Holidays" type of greeting. But that's what John the Baptist said to those who came to him. And these words were set in their lectionary context to be read during Advent in our liturgy. But way before that; in their original context, for John to call those who came to him a "brood of vipers"—Is this any way to encourage people? Is this any way to get people to follow you? Is this any way to build up a movement? Yet this is the first thing we hear from John in Luke's gospel, quoted right after the prophetic description of him read in today's scripture passage.

And that's because in the Bible John the Baptist is *not* an encourager; he's *not* a traditional leader; and he's *not* a strategic movement-builder. **He is a prophet!** He is a voice in the wilderness! And as such, his call was to speak the word of God as it came to him. So he served it up to people not watered down, not sugar-coated, but straight-up. And it didn't go down easy.

So if we think Christmas has become too commercial, too superficial, too sentimental and sticky-sweet, then John the Baptist is certainly the cure.

In the life of our church, this morning we're right in the midst of our celebration of the season of Advent. Earlier, we lit the second Advent candle—the candle of peace—as we try to focus in on the spiritual aspects of preparing for Christmas. And this afternoon we will join in celebrating community together at the Advent workshop and later at the choir's Solstice concert. It is a joyous momentous day, and in the midst of all the revelry and the contemplation, how does

John speak to us? **This wild unkempt man wearing camel hair and preaching fiery condemnation a couple millennia ago out in the desert by the Jordan River...**

Well first, John proclaims **repentance** for the forgiveness of sins. And true peace, which is our theme from the candle this week, could never come about without **repentance**.

Also, John intentionally lives in and speaks from the **wilderness**. And what better metaphor for the place we challenge ourselves to inhabit spiritually during Advent?—a far-removed space of **wilderness** that can be harsh and scary but is also set apart from the hustle and bustle of the marketplace we know so well, where we can make room for expectant waiting and interior preparation.

And finally, John uses **baptism** as the primary symbolic rite of his ministry. And today we ponder this sacrament that now serves us as a means of welcoming individuals into the church family, as many of us will reaffirm our own **baptism** while partaking of our church's other sacrament—communion, as we celebrate this church family.

These last couple weeks, I've been reading an enlightening novel called *John the Baptizer* by Brooks Hansen. It's a biblical historical fiction that expands upon the accounts of John in the gospels and creatively fills in some of the gaps while making use of other primary sources. As Hansen's John preaches repentance as a means of awakening to ethical consciousness, he tells the crowds, "I did not come to awaken just the high and mighty. The fishmonger sleeps if he sneaks his elbow on the scale. The farmer sleeps if he plunders his neighbor's field. Both the soldier and the publican, if they skim and extort, are asleep. As is the harlot. And the husband is no better than the king if he covets his brother's wife. And the wife is no better than he if she works the Sabbath, thinking, What does it gain me to rest? What does it gain me to give?"

In Hebrew and in John's biblical context, the word for repentance is *t'shuva*, which can also be expressed by the idea of turning. To turn *from* wrong-doing and to return *to* God. It isn't about saying you're *sorry*, or feeling *bad*, or being *afraid*. It's about waking up and making it right, and thereby stepping into closer relationship with God.

Back in 1991, in the run-up to the first Gulf War, a woman I know named Kathy from Chicago, in her desire for peace, felt her faith call her to go further with her own repentance. She felt that with her status as a US citizen, she was implicitly responsible for the war about to be waged in her name. So she decided to do something about it. She headed to the desert wilderness—literally. She and a number of other international peace and justice activists formed the Gulf Peace Team. They established a peace encampment along the Saudi Arabia-Iraq border in the weeks leading up to the US-led invasion that began that year on Martin Luther King Day.

Later, their experience in the desert, and that need for repentance, stayed with them. In 1996 several members of the Gulf Peace Team formed an organization to challenge nonviolently the *economic* warfare being waged by the US against the people of Iraq through global sanctions. Fittingly enough, they named this group Voices in the Wilderness.

Each of over 70 delegations the group sponsored illegally brought medicine and other needed supplies to Iraq, even though US law prohibited this simple humanitarian act, as it does similar acts in deserts nearer to us, like leaving jugs of water for journeying immigrants.

On such a delegation to Iraq in the late 90's, Kathy had the opportunity to visit a music school for children, where she met and was befriended by their director. He asked her if all Americans wanted to see his children suffer? And not just his own children, but his students, and so many others like them, since sanctions contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children under the age of five across the country. Kathy was deeply moved by the justified

reasons by which the man had come to this assumption, and she wanted to offer them something that might be able to prove to the director and the students that we did not all feel this way. The only thing she could think to offer was music. So she sang for them the song known by the tune *Finlandia*:

This is my song, O God of all the nations, a song of peace for lands afar and mine.

*This is my home, the country where my heart is; here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine*

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean, And sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.

But other lands have sunlight too and clover, And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.

****This is my song O God of all the nations, A song of peace for their land and for mine.****

Kathy later had a chance to return to the music school and visit again with the students and their teacher. He said he respected her commitment to them and that this time they wanted to offer something to her. To Kathy's surprise and delight, they began to sing that same familiar tune. Only the words were different. The music director had found and copied the music, translated the lyrics into Arabic, and rehearsed with the children, hoping someday they'd have the chance to perform it for their honored guest.

Voices in the Wilderness stepped up their work in 2003 and created the Iraq Peace Team of activists who sought to accompany the Iraqi people before, during, and after the US invasion of "shock and awe."

And Kathy knew she had to get back to the music school. She wanted to check on the children and to hear them sing again—a spark of life amidst all the death and destruction. But when she rounded the corner of the block where the school had been, all that was left was a pile of rubble. Broken-hearted, she sought out the director. He said the school had been blown to

bits. He said, “We’ll never again get back that school, those instruments, the life and hope they brought to those children. And I’ll tell you one more thing—**I will never sing that song again.** I just can’t believe in it anymore.”

But Kathy chooses still to believe—because she can and because she has to. She is not giving up on peace and on the ways she believes we need to repent for our nation’s war-making in that beautiful desert wilderness. She published a book titled *Other Lands Have Dreams* that recounts her experiences with the people of Iraq. And more recently, Voices in the Wilderness launched the “Life Under Occupation” campaign to keep the occupation of Iraq on the front burner of public discourse.

And that desert wilderness that our troops occupy in Iraq today may not be so different than the harsh one that John roamed in Palestine long ago.

Rabbi Adam Morris serves as a consultant to the editorial team of the *Seasons of the Spirit* Sunday School curriculum. When asked to explain for *kids* what this concept of being “in the wilderness” means for Jews today, in good rabbinic dialectical fashion, he answered with a question that I think works well for adults too. The rabbi asks, “Have you ever started a brand new school or gone away to camp for the first time? Think about what it was like for you...the whole thing from beginning to end.”

I guess that for many of us when we leave our familiar school or home to go somewhere new – it is really difficult. (Personally, I have to say, I know what he’s talking about...) Nothing is familiar – schedule, people, food – nothing. It is scary and intimidating. You even may want desperately to go back, even if where you have to go back to wasn’t even that great. But, I am also going to guess that even though it was hard and there may have even been some tears

involved, most of the time it turned out pretty good. (And even if the new place did not turn out so good, you probably learned a lot about yourself in the process.)

If you understand this kind of situation, then you understand what it is like to be in the wilderness, or the *midbar*, as it's known in Hebrew.

The wilderness is so important to the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Morris continues, that when we Jews talk about our struggles in this world, as communities or as individuals we turn to this metaphor of the wilderness to give us strength and comfort. The *midbar* – as desolate, empty and frightening as it was – was the place where our people knew God so well, it reminds us that we can know God in the places in our lives that feel empty, barren and frightening.

Steeped in that Jewish tradition, John the Baptist sought out the wilderness. The novelist Hansen says that John “went out alone into the desert, to where the only living thing was the sand, where the wind thrashed and the sun pounded down...and he sat still and listened.” And after “having sat and listened, the time had come for him to stand and teach.”

And what John taught the crowds that came to him was that “all that mattered was the purity of one's heart, which could be attained by repentance alone, and was borne out by deeds of kindness, righteousness, and charity.” “See that your arms are empty,” Hansen's John says, “for all that you have given, for he whose arms are empty from all he has given shall ascend, while he whose arms are full with the riches of this world shall be dragged down.” He promised ***“a kingdom where the high and mighty would be laid low and where the neediest and most humble would be uplifted and exalted.” As Isaiah proclaimed, every valley filled, every mountain made low; the crooked made straight, and the rough ways smooth. “And he told his followers this kingdom was near at hand. He said the earth was *pregnant* with heaven, and they believed him.”***

In traditional Christian theology, John is cast as the messenger announcing that the Christ has come. The gospel writer Luke sets the scene historically by listing all the important governmental and religious rulers in their high and mighty places. Then he sets up a huge contrast by proclaiming the real action is with John in the wilderness. Luke quotes Isaiah and claims that Isaiah was foretelling *John* as the one preparing the way of the Lord. For this reason, the lectionary had us hear this morning from the prophet Malachi as well. The assumption is that John is that figure like Elijah who has come to refine and to purify so that all may be ready to meet Jesus when he comes. Yet the questions remain: If the sum of John's appointed purpose had been to testify to Jesus as the Christ, and he willingly accepted this role, why did he continue to have followers after Jesus' ministry began? And why do records of one of the most respected historians of the time, the Jew Josephus, seem to accord a greater significance to John and his ministry than to Jesus? There are many ways in which to understand Jesus as in fact John the Baptist's disciple.

At Bible Study this week, some of us talked about what baptism by immersion would feel like—to choose to be totally dunked beneath the water and in that moment to be defenseless, completely vulnerable, and trusting. Hansen describes the baptism of one of Jesus' later disciples, Andrew, thusly: "John leaned him back down into the water again. It swept over him and swallowed him, and this time he was aware not only of the energy and of the life coursing through the water but of the place where it was coming from, like another realm surrounding this one, as John had said, *like another kingdom standing at the gates, teeming to come in, peering at them through the cracks...Andrew felt that he and the water, the light, the coursing beam of life, were one. And he knew that he was not alone, that he had never been alone, as the light within*

him was the same as shone within everyone and everything, only he had been covering his own eyes.”

John wanted people to wake up to that light. He was not only that voice in the wilderness that cried out, fiery and howling. But he is also a vessel of pure spiritual insight, so applicable today during Advent as we are called to seek peace in our own wildernesses. My older brother once told me that when he was a child he found it silly that adults walked everywhere, when clearly the best way to get from here to there is to run. It's faster, you get to do more, and it's so much more fun! This Advent, as we prepare for Christmas, how can we capture this youthful exuberance and wakefulness without the cost of our constant adult metaphorical running? How can we slow down the running through our ever-present to-do lists, but instead choose to run to God in those places of wilderness, seeking the solitude to sit and listen, then seeking the courage to stand and act?

As we move now into our time of communion together, I'll close with a prayer Hansen puts upon John's lips before he baptizes:

Poor are we who are apart from you, Have mercy on us.

Forgive us, and look not upon our faults and our missteps,

the thoughts and offences which weigh us down,

But look upon those acts that lift us up. Look upon our charity and upon our struggle.

Look upon the purity we seek and vow to keep this day.

Clothe us in your glory, Bathe us in your eternal light.

Free us from the hunger of our mortal flesh, as you are life in life,

the living water in our cup, and the bounty on our table; as you abide within, and reign over all.

Amen.