

Sermon for December 8, 2019 – “An Unlikely (Wilderness) Voice”

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A – Texts: Matthew 3:1-12

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As we journey deeper into the Advent season we hear from John the Baptist. John gets to make his appearance each year on the second Sunday in Advent preaching to us from the wilderness about the coming of the Messiah. John's place in the arc of Advent comes after we started with the end of time last week as Jesus implored the disciples to **Keep Awake** as the Son of Man was near. While John the Baptist appears at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry we tell his story as the prelude to the story of Jesus' birth. That seems only natural as John's ministry was all about preparing the way for the Messiah. At the same time that John always comes after warnings about the end of time isn't coincidence. John's preaching serves to re-orient us from the end times talk to the new thing about to happen with the Messiah's coming. John is framing the beginning of the story. John is setting the stage for us. John is helping us to see the world as it is and our need for the Messiah to come.

The figure that John cuts is definitely that of a “unique” character which is putting it mildly. John's a hermit living in wilderness way off the grid, as they say living and eating off the land. The details of his clothing and food might sound funny or even downright weird but they tell us something deeper about John and what he's all about. John's a hermit certainly, but why? Probably because he saw the need to walk away from society and the problems he sees with it. John wasn't always a hermit preaching in the desert. Actually, he was born into the priestly caste; his father Zechariah was a priest in the temple. If John had followed the plan as he was born into he would've served in the temple making sacrifices and administrating God's righteousness to the masses. The temple was the center of Israel's power and influence, the priests who served were people in positions of power. John was born into power but chose instead to walk away from all of that and rejects the power he inherited in birth. John could've chosen a route like his cousin Jesus who choose to hang out with the poor, with sinners and tax collectors over the rich and powerful. He could've, but he doesn't. Instead, John walks away from it all. Away from rich and poor, away from righteous and sinner. John chooses the great empty wilderness instead. And yet in a twist of irony as he tries to leave the centers of power and privilege behind he goes into the wilderness. There, he finds the very people he's trying to avoid. John finds himself preaching to the masses looking for salvation and to the religious authorities watching his every move. Despite walking away from his priestly duties in the temple John finds himself filling the same role in the wilderness. He's leading rituals that help make people righteous, baptisms. And he is preaching from the law the prophets. **“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord make his paths straight.”**

Despite John's best efforts to avoid the world of his day, the structures of power, the inequality and unfairness around him, the powerless and powerful, John finds himself addressing and naming the realities of that world. The crowds have come to him hoping for change, hoping for fixes to their difficult and suffering lives. The religious authorities have come to watch him and make sure he doesn't cause any trouble or – more likely – threaten their power. Instead, John preaches what no one wants to hear. He names the dark places of the world. He points to the brokenness and struggles of the world. He preaches that a Messiah is coming to straighten things out which means that things are crooked. He preaches the need for repentance and forgiveness of sins which means that people are broken. He preaches that it's not enough to rely on being Children of Abraham, the people chosen by God, or to rely on being Presbyterian or members of a particular church which means that who we **think** we are will not save us.

And yet John does something unusual for someone in his position. He admits that he's not the solution. In a turn to honest and authentic preaching and prophetic words John says that someone else, a Messiah, is coming to straighten the world out. Which means, of course, that John himself is not the one for whom the crowds are waiting. What an unusual thing for a popular person to admit in front of a crowd of eager people wanting to throw their devotion to a possible savior.

Think about that for a moment. Most would be leaders today, religious, political usually have no problem whatsoever announcing that not only do they know what ails people but they're the **only** one with the cure. John might be preaching to the problems of his day, but he could be just as well be speaking today. Much like John's world our world is full of desperate people who are suffering and in need of a change. People who are looking for the next strong man to show up and solve all the problems and make things the way they **used** to be or how they're **supposed** to be. Or like the religious authorities, there are those in the world who're very invested in the status quo, in keeping things as they are because they're benefitting greatly at the expense of most others. Not John. No, John's naming the reality that none of us really wants to admit. And that reality is that the world is dark and broken and suffering. That there is so much crookedness and greed, self-centeredness and injustice that there's no way that we can fix it on our own. Notice too, that John's assessment's not a **judgmental** one but a **realistic** one. A statement about how things just aren't right in the world that no matter how hard we try something's off.

We know this is **not** the way the world should be, but we don't know how to do anything about it. We can look around and see that the world isn't as it should be. We see people we know, and love being diagnosed with unfair illnesses and disease. We see our children or grandchildren being bullied at school. We see our neighbors getting laid off or families torn apart in relationship breakups. We see that we just cannot help fighting and misunderstanding, judging and fearing each other. We turn on the news and hear about violence, corruption and tragedy. We see all of this and we know that this is NOT how the world is supposed to be. This isn't right. And so we get why John has just left everything behind to go live in the wilderness; a place of emptiness that might be missing the comforts of life, but hopefully is also devoid of the tragedies and suffering and conflict. But there's something else that John tells us without words or preaching. Something about what God is up to in the dark and empty places. John, with all his flaws, contradictions and weirdness is doing God's work of announcing the Good News. God is using John of all people to tell crowds who are looking for someone else and religious authorities who don't want to listen that the Messiah is on the way. Luke's gospel puts it so very well telling us that, "**In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and Traconitis and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.**" All those important people from the Roman emperor on down to the high-priests and the Word of God came to a strange man wearing strange clothes eating strange food! God is bringing the Messiah's light to the world through John, an unlikely voice, coming from one of the most unexpected people imaginable. The fact that God is working in surprising and unexpected ways really cannot be understated. That God works in this way and through people like this, people like you and me, to announce that the good news is something of which we need to be reminded. That God is heralding the Messiah's coming with someone like John the Baptist shows us, as we've talked about before, that God is willing to use people that we might never consider for God's mission.

That God is sending a Messiah to straighten out our crooked places to Baptize us with the Holy Spirit, to transform us and our world, and that this is happening now is good news. It is THE Good News. And with this news, the news that the Messiah is coming to make straight paths, all the dark things that we see in our world, the sick loved ones, the struggling neighbors, the vulnerable children, the conflict and fear; all these dark things start to have a little less weight. They are pushed back in favor of a new world, in favor of the Messiah's world. A world that we, and people like us, are working to help make a reality here just like John in the wilderness.

You see, we're more like John that we probably realize or are willing to admit or accept. I said last week that **Keeping Awake** to the world around us is about **awareness**, being **attentive**, paying close attention to the world around us. It's about paying attention to the people and circumstances around us, especially the hard stuff, the scary stuff. Fred Rogers often said that when he was a boy and see scary things on the news his mother would say, "Look for the helpers." So, look around. Look **closely**. If you're truly paying attention you'll see. You'll see very ordinary people doing extraordinary things. You'll see unique preachers and prophets not all that different from you bearing the Good News. You'll see people who confess and have forgiven sins. People who sing and praise God, pray and preach the Word. People who baptize and are baptized, people who share in the bread and wine of life, people who're helping bring about the Kingdom of Heaven simply by being together. Unlikely people who're God's hands and feet in the world.

The question each of us must ask is not how can God possibly use someone like me, the question is "How can I help?"

On the second Sunday in Advent, the arc of the Advent story takes us from the end of time to the beginning of the process, of God making all things new. God is using John to speak from the wilderness. God is using unlikely voices from unlikely places in an unlikely place to unlikely listeners to tell the story on the mountains, the hills and everywhere of the birth of the Messiah.

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.