

Advent II (C)
Trinity Parish Seattle
December 6, 2015

Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Today is one of about four times during the year when John the Baptist shows up in our lectionary. He always seems to have something new to say to us, even though the words are always the same!

John is a cousin to our Lord, and also the forerunner of the Messiah – the one who announces his coming, as we hear in the Gospel today. In introducing John, the writer of Luke says he is “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Just those words all by themselves speak to me today and hold out a kind of promise that has been hard to find in the event of the past week. “Make his paths straight.” “The crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Don’t we all long for this to be so!

Last week I spoke of the season of Advent as being “liminal time,” by which we mean a transitional or initial stage of a process – a time of anticipation and longing and expectation of Christ’s coming. Today the gospel introduces us to a liminal space – the wilderness out of which John speaks and from which he comes. It is a space that holds mystery and danger and even fear within it. It is a place with deeply symbolic meaning for the people of Israel and their collective experience.

The wilderness out of which John came falls to the east of Jerusalem, the city that was itself the symbol of God’s presence as located in the temple. And that vast wilderness that lay to the east was the wilderness across which the people of Israel journeyed into exile and then back again in the centuries before John. It is

the time out of which the prophet Isaiah comes when he first prophesied of that “voice crying out in the wilderness.” It is a barren land with hills and valleys and rough places, crooked paths that impeded the returning exiles and frustrated their progress in their return home from exile in a foreign place. Nothing would be better for those crossing it than to have those rough places smoothed out and crooked places straightened, and its hills brought low and its valleys filled. Isaiah’s vision of one who would finally set all things right was a cry of desperation, but also of great hope and promise to a beleaguered and weary people.

And into this liminal space comes John announcing the coming of a messiah who would do these things.

The wilderness, of course, is a metaphor for life. Frere Ivan in *The Desert and the City* says that “There is a physical desert, inhabited by a few exceptional men and women who are called to live there; but more importantly, there is an inner desert, into which each one of us must... venture. It is a voice; an empty space for solitude and testing.”¹ And tested we surely are.

Our wilderness is in that liminal space between “the nightmare that often is and the dream that God intends,” as our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, is fond of saying. It is the space between our place of exile and our heart’s truest home – between the harsh reality of the world as we know it and the world God desires for us to share.

This week we have all lived with too much of the nightmare that often is. We’ve been confronted with yet more unthinkable violence. More rough places and crooked paths. This scourge of violence in our nation continues to rob innocent people of life and its promise and its beauty, and it can rob all of us of our sense of security and even our courage. At the same time there are people fleeing violence in other parts of the world who continue to seek the safety of a new home. Talk about wildernesses – talk about liminal spaces between the nightmare that is and the dream that God intends!

How can our hearts not be broken? And how can we not cry out, “how long, O Lord? How long must this go on?”

¹ Frere Ivan, *The Desert and the City* (quoted from *The Desert, An Anthology for Lent*).

This week's horrific events in San Bernadino have aroused new fears and indications that we have now entered new territory in the so-called "war on terror." I say "so-called" because war itself seems to be part of the problem. The more we wage it in the ways we have been accustomed to, the more deeply entrenched the forces of opposition become and the more justification they find in what for them is a moral crusade. We need a serious examination of the tools that are best used in this new kind of war for the hearts and minds of people.

An opinion piece in the New York Times cites research indicating that "when people are reminded of their mortality [as we have been this week in the most ugly way]... they will more readily enforce their cultural worldviews. If our cultural worldview is xenophobic, nationalistic or moralistic, we are prone to become more so." And we see and hear that happening as the drumbeats of war mount all around us. We seem to have forgotten the words of Ecclesiastes when he said, "The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of rulers among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good." (Ecclesiastes 9)

John the Baptist came on the scene in just such a time. It was a time of political instability, and lots of people came out to hear what he had to say in a time of all kinds of apocalyptic expectations. And what did John have to say? Repent! Turn around. Do things differently! Find another way than the one you are on!

John knew that preparing to welcome the messiah, the one who will usher in the dream, would require a change in heart and mind, and to reorient our way of thinking in a new direction. Repent! Turn and go another way, was his call.

Repentance requires something of us that we don't always have, and that is humility. It asks us to examine ourselves. Take a big deep breath, and ask ourselves whether the path we are on will take us from the nightmare we are experiencing to the dream of God. It is impossible to repent when we know we are right and everyone else is wrong. But the call to repentance demands that we consider the possibility that we have not seen all there is to see, understood all there is to understand, or acted in ways that were most conducive to the dream that God is trying to bring about – and that we just might need to try another way.

Jean Vanier is perhaps one of the most humble people I've ever met. He's a Canadian Roman Catholic philosopher, theologian and humanitarian. Much of what he has learned in life has come in the context of his life's work not with the high and mighty, but with people living with developmental disabilities. He says,

Our brokenness is the wound through which the full power of God can penetrate our being and transfigure us in God. Loneliness [and I would also say fear] is not something from which we must flee but the place from where we can cry out to God, where God will find us and we can find God. Yes, through our wounds the power of God can [enter and fill] us and become like rivers of living water to irrigate the arid earth within us... so that hope and love are reborn.²

Repentance calls us to look our brokenness in the face so that we are not unconsciously driven by what is broken in us, but so that our brokenness becomes the means by which God enters us and begins the work of transformation. And it is in that brokenness that we can experience the power of God transfiguring us, leading us to new hope and to true love.

John the Baptist knew that it was only through this good hard look at ourselves, and a turning and going another way that the path through the desert to the dream of God could be opened to us.

So, in this Advent season as we await the coming of Christ. Come, Lord Jesus, come, is our prayer. May we prepare our hearts to receive him, so that we and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

² Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body* (Paulist Press, 1988).