Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 40 Psalm 85 Mark 1:1-8

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 12-6-20

A.A. Milne once wrote a perfect story for the second Sunday of Advent without even intending to do so. In this story Winnie the Pooh was out walking on a fine winter's day, when he saw some tracks in the snow, which he decided to follow in order to find out who made them. Piglet then came on the scene and decided to join Winnie the Pooh in this adventure, and very soon Pooh noticed with alarm that there were now two sets of paw prints in the snow, which seemed to be going around a spinney of larch trees.

Pooh and Piglet continued to follow the tracks around the larch trees, wondering aloud if it might have been a Woozle that made them, when Pooh suddenly stopped and pointed excitedly in front of him.

"Look!" he yelled… "The tracks! A third animal has joined the other two!"

"Pooh!" cried Piglet, "Do you think it is another Woozle?"

"No," said Pooh, "Because it makes different marks. It is either two Woozles and one Wizzle, or two Wizzles and one Woozle. Let us continue to follow them."

So, as the story goes, Pooh and Piglet continued to follow the footprints in the snow, growing more anxious with each trip around the spinney of larch trees, because with each trip around, they saw that the number of animals in front of them was increasing, and with it (as they agreed with trepidation) the possibility that these animals might be of "hostile intent."

And so it went until quite unexpectedly, Pooh heard something above them… A whistle, coming from the branches in the tree. He looked up from the tracks in the snow, and there he saw his friend Christopher Robin sitting on one of the branches…

"Silly old Bear," Christopher Robin said, "what were you doing? First you went around the spinney twice yourself, and then Piglet ran after you and you went round again together, and then you were going around a fourth time -----"

"Wait a moment," said Winnie the Pooh, holding up his paw.

He sat down and thought, in the most thoughtful way he could think. Then he fitted his paw into one of the tracks… and then scratched his nose twice and stood up.

"Yes," said Winnie the Pooh. "I see now. I have been Foolish and Deluded, and I am a Bear of no Brian at all."

A realization on Winnie the Pooh's part which, though difficult for him to reckon with, freed him from his endless trips around the spinney of larch trees, and allowed him to go off into the Hundred Acre Woods for more adventures.

It is a perfect story for the second Sunday in Advent because in it Christopher Robin does the very same thing from his place on the tree branch as John the Baptist did out in the wilderness… Namely, call out "Stop! Look at what you're doing… There is something to life other than following your own tracks around and around in the snow… Come! Turn and go a different direction… Step out of that endless circling around the spinney of larch trees and open your eyes and your heart to see what else is dawning on the horizon…."

Of course John the Baptist was not in the Hundred Acre Woods, but out in the Judean countryside, **which** as indicted in our Gospel text for this morning, was the "wilderness," **which,** as is always true in the Bible, is the place where the Biblical characters always found themselves most vulnerable, far away from the normal supports of life… The place where the most "teachable moments" in our Holy Scriptures seemed to happen…

And what the "teacher/preacher/prophet" John the Baptist proclaimed out there in the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan River to all those coming to him for baptism was "repent"! … "*Shuv"* in the Hebrew… "*Metanoia"* in the Greek, both of which carry with them the sense of a complete change of direction… not just a simple apology like, "I'm sorry, please forgive me for the sixteen things I did wrong yesterday," but the difficult recognition that all along one has been following one's own tracks around the spinney of larch trees to the "captivating," debilitating and isolating tune of "Me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me"…

The spinney of larch trees that binds us as human beings to such things as fear, shame, greed, despair, apathy, cynicism etc. with a force so strong it can almost begin feeling normal… (Like the elephants in the circus who, after being chained and forced to walk in a circle for ever so long, no longer need the chains to keep them going in that same circle)…

When John the Baptist called out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," he was saying to all those gathered, "Stop following your own tracks around and around the Spinney of larch trees… Look up, turn away from that endless cycle of delusions that hold you captive, and focus your eyes, your heart and your life on something totally different… Look! It's a kingdom coming, dawning with the one who even now is on the way…

"I will baptize you with water, and cleanse you of your sins," proclaimed John the Baptist… "But this one… this one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and by the power of that baptism **anything and everything** that seeks to keep you bound will be burned in the crucible of love… Freeing you to live a life in the fullness of God's kingdom come, in the name of **this one** who will show us how…

For a very long time I didn't know this was what John the Baptist was up to… Matter of fact, mostly what I thought about this crotchety old character was that he went around singing his own version of a holiday favorite… his version going like this…

Oh you better watch out, you better aim high,

You better walk straight, I'm telling you why,

Jesus Christ is coming to town.

He's making a list, checking it twice,

Gonna find out who's naughty or nice,

Jesus Christ is coming to town.

He knows if you've been lazy,

He knows if you've made a mistake,

He knows if you've been to church or not,

S'ya'better go for goodness sake.

Oh you better watch out, you better aim high,

You better walk straight, I'm telling you why,

Jesus Christ is coming to town…

For a very long time I thought this was what John the Baptist was up to… But then, one day I read the first verse of this morning's Gospel text from Mark, and I realized that it said, "The beginning of the **good news** of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"... The **"good news"**… and I realized that if John the Baptist's job was to prepare peoples' hearts for hearing and receiving the **"good news"** of Jesus, then he could **not** have been singing the Jesus version of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town"…

Because how could a message intended to get people to stop doing the delusional no-brain things they're doing and to turn them toward something called **"good news"** be a "bad-news-you-better-do-this-or-else" kind of proclamation?... That insight that day causing me to see John the Baptist in a totally new light; not so different perhaps from the person described

by a pastor friend of mine in a sermon he gave one day in which he spoke of an experience he had in an old church in Florence, Italy…

So as the story goes, this pastor friend was on a vacation in Italy (pre-Covid of course), and had come to the last day of his "time away." He was feeling despondent about the prospect of returning home and back to the incessant demands of parish ministry… (And let me just tell you, in case you didn't know, that parish pastors can very easily get going around the spinney of larch trees called "unrealistic expectations, self-importance, self-doubt, guilt, fear, and shame" causing them, just like Winnie the Pooh, to become quite deluded and of no brain or no heart at all, without even realizing it).

It was just such a spinney of larch trees around which my pastor friend was going on that last day of vacation when he happened into one of the oldest churches in Florence, and there found a bevy of other tourists milling around the sanctuary looking at all the paintings and sculptures, tapestries and woodcarvings, taking pictures, and chit-chatting quietly… Activities in which he decided to partake in hopes of getting out of his doldrums…

It was when he was part-way down one of the side aisles that my friend said he caught sight of a figure coming through the church door; a tall black woman adorned in a golden robe and hat, "from Africa perhaps," my pastor friend thought to himself as he watched the woman walk to the baptismal font situated about ¼ of the way up the center aisle of the church… And there saw her stop and lay her hands on the font just as sunlight from a round window above the entrance doors found its way to her, setting her whole being a-blaze…

Not everyone in the room had noticed the woman yet, many of them still milling about, chatting quietly and taking pictures… But then, as my friend tells the story, the woman began to sing… lifting her head, closing her eyes and singing "Deep River, my home is over Jordan… Deep River, I want to cross over into Campland."

And as her voice carried through the room, everyone stopped… Stopped whatever it was they were doing…. Whatever outward activity they were busy doing… whatever inward spinney of larch trees they were circling… they just stopped and listened to the woman dressed in the golden robe as she held onto the baptismal font and sang "Deep River" in the dazzling light of the sun… Tourists from all over the world; all of them focused on this one extraordinary sight… this one extraordinary sound… Following her movement then, after the song was over as she walked slowly down the aisle to the center of the room and there sang Mozart's "Jubilate Deo," before she turned, walked back down the aisle and out the door…

Later in the afternoon, as my friend said in his sermon, he saw a flyer in a city square announcing a concert that was to be given in Florence the next day; a concert given by the great African American soprano Jesse Norman… And it was then that he realized it had been her who had stopped everyone in their tracks that morning in the sanctuary of the old church as they turned from whatever it was they were doing to hear her sing…

Now I know that in many ways Jesse Norman and John the Baptist couldn't seem like two characters with less in common… But what I want to say is that this story of Jesse Norman's unannounced concert in the church that day when she took hold of the baptismal font and sang "Deep River," and then walked to the center of the sanctuary and sang "Jubilate Deo" ("Glory to God," "Praise be to God"), has helped me to understand what John the Baptist was up to as he sang his own version of those same two songs alongside the Jordan River in the wilderness of Judea…

Because what he was up to was a proclamation of **good news**… News of a kingdom dawning in which a certain kind of love is made known… a love that not only shows up in ancient churches in Florence, Italy, creating a constellation of connection amongst people from every country in the world, but a love that shows up in wilderness places both communal and personal in nature…

Those wilderness places where fear, shame, greed, despair, apathy, cynicism, injustice, violence, etc. etc. seem like they will have the last word… Those wilderness places where we, like Winnie the Pooh… like the elephants in the circus, keep going around the same old circles, following own footprints in the snow…

What John the Baptist was proclaiming out there in the wilderness was the dawning of a love that makes the wilderness its home… meaning this love, despite all evidence to the contrary, is present in those places where suffering is deep and loss is gut-wrenching (as it most certainly must be in our little Island Nursing Home right now, as it is in so many other places where the virus is running rampant)…

… Meaning this love is present and walks with us even in our endless circling around the spinney of larch trees, longing for us to stop long enough to see that even there, "Emmanuel, God with us" is with us… The very one who will go to all lengths + to release us from **anything and everything** that keeps us bound, so we might be free to live a life in the fullness of God's kingdom come, in the name of **the one** who shows us how…

On this second Sunday in Advent, as we hear John the Baptist's call to repentance, (whether we see him as the crotchety old locust-eating prophet crying out in the wilderness, or as Christopher Robin whistling from the branch overhead, or as the brilliant Jesse Norman ablaze with song)… On this second Sunday in Advent, may we hear the sound of love calling us to **stop**, to acknowledge the ways in which we may be deluded and foolish and of no-brain or no-heart at all…

May we sense, even in the recognition of our incessant circling around the spinney of larch trees, the presence of the love that will not let us go, made incarnate in the One whose coming is certain and whose day draws near…

And may this **good news** of “Emmanuel God with Us” make of us all Jesse Normans, ablaze with God’s love and singing God’s song.