

The beginning of good news

The Second Sunday of Advent (Year B, BCP) December 6, 2020

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." - Mark, 1:1-8

Today, the Second Sunday of Advent, is all about prophets. They are introduced and featured in the Collect of the Day as 'messengers' sent by God, with a vocation 'to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation.'

In doing what they are sent to do, prophets often put us on the spot. They ask us to grow up and take responsibility for who we have become, and for who we have yet to become. Prophets often disregard decorum in order to say what needs to be said:

Take a long, hard look at the injuries and pain you've inflicted on others, and on yourself.

Close the gap between your words and your actions.

Prophets are widely thought of as shame mongers and nuisances. And it's true that they often call us out on our depravities, and uncomfortably so. But look closer. A truer understanding of prophets relies on hope, as we heard this morning in the words of Isaiah:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ...

And later

*... the Lord GOD will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom ...*

Look closely and we will see that hope is also a main premise of the ministry and message of John the Baptist. To be sure, he has a temper; his voice has an edge as he urges our self-examination and repentance. But notice that this morning's gospel passage is a trailhead. It is, in fact, the only way in to the Gospel of Mark, and there is a sign at the entrance. It reads:

"The beginning of ... good news ..."

Specifically, this is, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This is also, ostensibly, the beginning of good news for us.

Repentance may seem an unlikely starting point for good news. But after urging our own repentance, today's collect prays that we do so '*that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer ...*' Consider, as another possible cue, the witness of many recovering alcoholics. They take on the agony of getting sober, including the rigorous self-examination, in part because of the second of the 12 steps in AA: "*We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*" What if your repentance or mine were driven by that same positive aspiration, that same hope?

We tend to think that a prophet's primary tools are words. And in fact, the Collect for today does describe them as '*messengers*' who '*preach repentance.*' But prophets are not merely oracles. The collect also indicates that they '*prepare the way for our salvation.*' Words are joined by actions. John's message of repentance was complemented by a literal hands-on ministry of baptism. True prophets *do* speak necessary, difficult words, *and* they often stay with us, they support us and they are on standby as we consent to some cleansing baptism and then rise up again from the waters, hoping to see and be the beginning of good news.

We tend to think that all prophets are men, when in fact they may be men, women or children.

We tend to think that prophets mainly see into and talk about the future. Sometimes they do. But more often than not they are looking for the reign of God in and among us here and now, and they challenge how we may be obstructing that divine here and now.

We tend to think that all prophets are exotic, that they all shout, and that they are all dead. Many prophets in the Bible do conform to most or all of these characterizations. But some of the prophets most likely to be of value to you or me aren't found in the Bible. Their language may or may not be religious. They may be historical or public figures known to us only through books or documentaries. Or they may be plainspoken neighbors. They mostly live below our spiritual radar until some insight or question gives us goosebumps and then changes our ways of thinking and being. Some tortuous path has been made straight, and now we know the way forward.

With regard to prophets, we pray in today's collect that we may '*...heed their warnings and forsake our sins ...*' We should naturally ask what prophets God may be sending to us at this time. What are they asking us to see or do? In what ways might the heeding of their warnings and the forsaking of our sins be the beginning of good news for us?

Before ending, let me address one final misconception about prophets. You and I are prone to believing that prophets are other people. But what if, on occasion, you or I are the ones who are sent by God as messengers, to preach repentance and prepare the way of salvation for another? Maybe some present situation or relationship or hazard or opportunity comes to mind. Maybe we resist because we didn't go to seminary or it's not our usual role or because of decorum. It's just too awkward, weird and uncomfortable.

Before you close the door on the possibility of your own moment or call as a prophet, consider the possibility that the message and preparation with which you may be entrusted may be, for someone who desperately needs it, the beginning of good news. *Amen.*