

The voice in the wilderness

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2015.

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.

Luke 3:6

As we anticipate the celebration of the birth of Christ in this Advent season, we hear the cry of John the Baptist as the voice one crying in the wilderness. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, he proclaims, "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."

Saint Luke pinpoints that time in history when John the Baptist appeared. It was in the year 29 A.D., the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee. The prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled. As John spoke to the people of his time, his prophetic voice speaks to us in our own time. He proclaims the coming of Christ whom God anointed to lead us out of spiritual wilderness.

This is the season of giving and receiving gifts. Christ is the greatest gift ever given or received. One of the best ways for us to use that gift is by giving ourselves in his service. When we appreciate those who are gifts to us we want to make a gift of ourselves to others. One of the best way we can do that is to have an open mind, especially with those with whom we don't agree or have little in common. An attitude of gratefulness enables us to have an open mind. If a parent, a spouse, teacher, friend or a stranger helped us find our way out of a spiritual wilderness, it was a gift we never forget because it was given out of kindness. Some of the most cherished gifts I have received were acts of kindness. I suspect that they may not recall what they did or said that made a difference in my life, but I remember. Those who radiate kindness and thoughtfulness leave their mark on us. Remembering a kindness is far better than bearing a grudge.

As we prowl through department stores, look over catalogues and order gifts on-line, we are grateful for those who have been gifts to us in intangible ways. They may have offered support and encouragement or they made a connection for us. They may have told us what we didn't want to hear but needed to know. We may have been put off by their blunt honesty, but if it was because they cared for us, it made us stop and think.

John the Baptist's call to repentance reminds us that there are times when we need to stop, turn around and head in a new direction. He calls us to prepare the way for Jesus who taught and lived the true nature of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. The Pharisees emphasized the strict letter of the law as the way to achieve perfection. This, of course, is impossible because we are by nature imperfect. To reproach our selves for not being perfect only results in emotional and spiritual strain. We can try, but we can't always get everything right. Yet, why aim for anything less? Accepting our own frailties is our first step on our way out of spiritual wilderness.

The fundamental difference between Jesus and John the Baptist is that John's prophecy is about judgment and the wrath to come while Jesus preaches love, mercy, and forgiveness. With mass shootings so much a part of our national way of life, it is going to require a dramatic change of attitude. People who are emotionally overwrought need to help in managing their anger. The tragedy is that twisted and sick minds will use a gun to vent their rage and hatred. Stricter gun laws have had little effect. Putting more guns in the hands of everyone is not the answer. Gun violence in our country will continue as long as assault weapons are in the hands of people who have been brainwashed. It will continue as long as the NRA and politicians play on the fears of the American people who are desperate for a way to defend against the epidemic of gun violence.

The gospel focuses on those who live on the margins who are barely making it. As the gap between rich and poor grows wider our sense of compassion motivates us to help lift them out of the cycle of poverty. The notion of “trickle down” economics didn’t work for them. The work of redemption is accomplished by getting beyond old negative patterns that oppress the poor and new approaches are developed that give the poor a hand up, not a hand out. Racism and poverty go hand in hand. All lives matter, black or white.

In John the Baptist, God chose an eccentric from the Judean wilderness to call us to repentance. Who else could have captured our attention? We hear no pious platitudes from him, just the plain unvarnished truth. His boldness for telling the truth came at the sacrifice of his life. John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus were true ascetics and counter-cultural prophets. They ushered in new era in which all our values are reversed. Those who think they should be first come last and those who are least are first. Those who have much will share with those who have little or nothing. To be in Christ is to have no interest in gaining wealth or accumulating possessions and no need for personal popularity.

We must not let ourselves get discouraged by the decline in church attendance. People still have the need for inner spirituality. People are looking for the church to transform their lives by providing meaning and substance. We need to reexamine what it means to be the church in today’s world. The millennial generation wants the church to be honest and straightforward. The relevance of Christianity lies not in being trendy but in responding to the call to redeem humanity. Consider this, If everyone here invited just one other person to join us here at Emmanuel Church, it would double our attendance. I know what being part of Emmanuel means to you and I hope that you will share that with those who are looking for more meaning in their lives.

As our new Presiding Bishop Michael Curry tells us, God is not finished with us. We are a work in progress. We strive to maintain our vitality and viability as a people of God in the wider church of which Emmanuel Church in West Roxbury is very much a part. Our mission is to proclaim and share the message of hope in Christ to all people in every possible way. If we persevere and not grow weary we will find ourselves numbered among that great cloud of witnesses known as the saints of God.