

A 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 7, 2014.

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins
Mark 1:4

Let us envision ourselves for a moment as part of a cast of characters in this sacred drama of redemption. The first character to make his entrance is the prophet Isaiah calling us to make way for the coming of a savior. He writes: Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill will be made low and the rough places a plain. The psalmist proclaims that mercy and truth have kissed each other. Saint Peter exhorts us to lead lives of holiness and godliness and peace without spot or blemish. Finally, Saint Mark tells how God chose the unique and remarkable character of John the Baptist to proclaim the coming of Christ.

If this were a stage play, John would be the central character in this drama of redemption. God knew that John the Baptist was the right person at the right time and in the right place to herald the arrival of the Savior. He is the kind of person God needs because he is totally authentic. If you have two pieces of silver, at first glance they all look alike, but some are sterling silver while others are silver-plated. You can tell the difference by the weight. Likewise, John the Baptist is the totally authentic; he is a sterling character.

In this great drama of redemption the character of John the Baptist stands out as an individualist. He is his own person. As cousins, John and Jesus knew each other and Biblical scholars tell us that before Jesus began his ministry, he may have spent his early years with John in the community of Qumran near the Dead Sea. John lives an ascetic life in the bleak Judean desert, clothed in animal skins and subsisting on locusts and wild honey. He boldly proclaims the coming of Christ and doesn't hesitate to tell people what they need to know. He is off-putting to some while others are compelled to listen because what he is saying makes sense to them.

God knew that John's rough-hewn style might put some people off, but an outspokenly blunt voice is necessary to tell us what we don't always want to hear. Such voices are either annoying or helpful, depending on whether or not we choose to listen. We aren't comfortable with people getting in our face with criticisms. We tend to listen to those whom we trust who have the credibility to speak the truth.

I like John for his strength of character and boldness in proclaiming the truth in a direct, honest and forthright way. I admire the convincing manner in which he presents his case. He believes what he says and says what he believes. We can trust a person like that. He may be irritating in his manner and style, but that's our problem if we are uncomfortable in being confronted with the truth about ourselves. If bluntness is what it takes to get us to change, then all for the better.

John makes it clear that he is not the Messiah when he says that he is not worthy to untie the thong of Jesus' sandals. He always points beyond himself to the One who is to come. He is a man totally without pretense or personal ambition. John the Baptist is intrusive because he invades our complacency and challenges our assumptions. For those of us who were brought up to be competitive and to achieve as much as we can, he turns everything around by telling us that none of that matters. He tells us that we are too comfortable in our familiar patterns and comfort zones. He calls us to repent and turn to a new way of living the Spirit of God. Breaking out of old habits means changing the way we see ourselves by bringing out our better person within.

John doesn't just suggest, he demands that we repent by demanding the best in ourselves. The story is told of how Abraham Lincoln once sat through a long and well-crafted sermon. When asked what he thought of it, he said, "It was very eloquent, but it lacked one essential thing. It didn't ask enough of us." This Advent season is a time to look at our own life and question if we are expecting enough of ourselves. This is a time to name the shortcomings that may or may not be obvious to anyone else but us. It may be a temper that gets out of control. It may be an unwillingness to express feelings appropriately because of a lack of self-esteem. Whatever it is; now is the time to assess what we need to do both in our personal and corporate lives to make the necessary changes.

The police who are trained to protect us have lost credibility with defending themselves and subduing suspects and causing their death. Our law enforcement system has to take a look at their policies of arresting people, particularly unarmed black citizens whose recent tragic deaths has revealed the imbalance in nation's justice system.

None of us is hopeless. In the hopeful light of Christ we can change our behavior and our habits. We are never too old or set in our ways to change. It is when everything seems hopeless that the "unreasonableness" of Christian hope that is the common good shared by all humanity. Now is the time to make changes, not tomorrow, not next week, but right now.

As you shop for and wrap gifts for this coming Christmas season, make a mental note of what kind of gift you are to others. Our outer wrapping is how we present ourselves to others. The best gift we can be to each other is to be positive and hopeful and not give in to despair and negativity that becomes contagious. People don't want to be around someone who is wrapped in a woeful countenance and negativity. We must always try to see how something can be done before saying that it can't be done.

When we present ourselves as our best gift offering to God, we are also making a gift offering of ourselves to our sisters and brothers. We bring out the best in others by bringing out the best in ourselves. We are all characters in this great drama of redeeming humanity. Don't miss your cue.