

### **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 10, 2017.

*Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Psalm 85:10*

The prophets of God are not fortunetellers. Both ancient and modern prophets are those who can speak the mind of God because of their personally close relationship with God. One of the ancient spokesmen for God is the prophet Isaiah. He perceives that his people have strayed from God and warns them of what will happen if they continue their wrong course.

In Isaiah's time, the people of Jerusalem and all Judea are suffering great losses. Their temple is in ruins, the monarchy is gone, and there is little to hold them together as a people and nation. Isaiah's message is one of warning and encouragement. He writes, Comfort my people and cry to her that her warfare is ended. (Isaiah 40:1) He is a lone voice crying out in the wilderness warning people to repent and turn back to God. He urges them to, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. (Isaiah 40:3-4) The people long for the day when the kingdom would be proclaimed and Israel restored to former glory.

The highway in the desert is a rich imagery for the prophet. When you travel north through the hills and mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont, you can see how modern engineering has made the highways level for driving through the countryside. The valleys are filled in and the granite hills are made low to make highway traveling smooth and safe. Many of the ancient highways were ingeniously engineered and constructed for ceremonial purposes for triumphal kings and warriors to march in their victory parade. In Isaiah's imagery, the highway is made ready for God to come in glorious majesty to save the people.

Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist to proclaim the coming of Jesus as the Christ of God to save people from their own destruction. John's fame draws many from all around the Judean countryside who come to him to repent and be baptized. As eccentric and dynamic as he is, John makes no claim for himself. With his compelling personality, he has a strong following and could have created a cult for himself, but he never forgets who he is or his mission to herald the coming of Christ. John directs attention beyond himself to the Christ who is to come.

When we apply the Christian faith in our own lives, we are pointing beyond ourselves to Christ. His life and teachings nurture us in what it means to have the capacity to love even the most unlovable among us. God's grace redeems even the most notorious sinner. For those who repent, there is no such thing as an unforgivable sinner.

Repentance is not about groveling. It is about turning our lives around to head in the right direction. When we are traveling in an unknown place and are unable to find our way, when we are able to get our bearings we are relieved to know we are headed in the right direction. The same is true when we listen to prophets both ancient and modern.

When we have a positive attitude we expect things to go according to plan. We expect that our jobs, our marriage, our health and our children's lives will turn out the way we hope and expect, though that is not always the case. When things don't turn out the way we hoped, we have to get over our disappointment and adjust to a new course. There is no need to blame God when things don't go our way. Likewise, there is no need blame others for our own mistakes. We have to take responsibility for ourselves in the words of the serenity prayer by changing the things we can, accepting the things we can't and having the wisdom to know the difference.

We don't always know the nature of God's wisdom. I have made decisions that turned out to be what I felt God wanted for me, but I also have had to learn from wrong choices as well. If you've ever been disappointed that you didn't get what you wanted and then came to find that you would have regretted it, you can't help but feel God's wisdom at work in your life. We don't always know what is best for us and have to trust what God knows to be right.

We live in a paradoxical time in which our sophisticated communication systems allow us to delete people out of our lives. We have more timesaving conveniences but never enough time. We have more education but less common sense. We are being shaken out of our complacency in the realization that bigotry, intolerance, and the phobia over Islam are on the increase. We find our way through the wilderness and confusion of changing values to a new understanding of what it means to be human. In our search for a moral compass, we would do well to listen to what the ancient and modern prophets are telling us.

By all appearances, John the Baptist had little going for him. He had no formal education, no status and no wealth. By contrast, John tells us to fast, while Jesus invites us to a feast. John lives a solitary life while Jesus moves among the crowds to heal and declare God's forgiveness. John warns of the coming wrath of God's judgment while Jesus proclaims a merciful and forgiving God. John calls people to repentance while Jesus promises the joy of forgiveness. John is centered on morality while Jesus focuses on healing. John preaches against sin while Jesus eats with sinners.

John is wholly transparent in his obedience to God. By living what he preaches, he lets the light of the Christ shine through. His expectation is that the words of the psalmist will be fulfilled: Mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and peace have kissed each other. (Psalm 85:10)

Because of our gift of free will, we all had to leave the innocence of our personal Garden of Eden to enter the world of sin. Our hope for redemption is that God through Christ has taken the initiative to bring us back to save us from ourselves.

When we were made one with Christ in the water of baptism, it was our first experience of the gift of God's grace. We get another glimpse of God's grace when we learn to forgive, as we want to be forgiven. Every time we emulate Christ in our lives, a bit of paradise is regained.