

Advent II Year C 2024

A word about prophecy....Advent after all is the season of prophecy. And the Gospel of Luke from which we'll be reading this year is a gospel first and foremost about prophecy. We know now what a false prophet is, don't we? In our culture, prophecy is usually described as the ability to predict the future. In the church, when we talk about prophecy: we remember the biblical accounts of God speaking to Abraham and his wife, telling them that their progeny will become a great nation; Of Joseph speaking of the coming blight and famine in Egypt; Of Saul prophesying that young David will become a great king... Of Jeremiah lamenting over the corrupt leadership of Israel which, because of its unjust and callous indifference, will be its undoing.... Prophets in scripture have the advantage of hindsight... they are not foretelling; they are interpreting.... and, particularly in this season, we think of the prophet Isaiah prophesying of the one, a little child no less, who will lead Israel to a new found freedom; and of Gabriel speaking to Mary about her bearing a child who is God's son... and of her suffering to come... and his. When the light wanes, it seems, prophets come out of the woodwork.

I encountered one such prophet just a couple of years ago at Greer's Downtown Market. I stopped by for something on my way home from work... Greer's is something of a social experience... there is excited banter along the aisles... people visiting, more than they are shopping... It is mostly low income people there... people worn and seasoned with the rigors of life... As I was standing in the check-out line an older man in

a wheelchair approached me. His clothes were worn and a little tattered. He only had socks on his swollen feet. His eyes were glazed with cataracts. I had on my clerical collar so he knew I was a priest. He told me he had been preaching at his church for some forty years... He asked me which church was mine, and I told him. "Are you a blessing to your people?" he asked. I was taken aback. Before I could muster an answer He said, "after all these years, I know just one thing" "What is that, sir?" I asked. "The world just ain't the way God would have it." "There is so much evil in the world, and for that reason we all have to be a blessing to others." Tiberias on the corner of Government and Broad Streets.... I checked out and left the store... back into the dark... and he too, I assume... back into the dark and harried world from which he came.

Here's the thing about prophets... They don't predict the future... They tell of things the way they are... they speak the truth... They speak the truth in context.... In our own place and time... They pay attention, and the truth they speak goes to the patterns of our history. They are myth makers. There is an artful timelessness about prophecy, and we are compelled to listen.... and another thing about prophets... We don't find them among polite company; we don't find them among the lofty seats of power; we don't encounter them from within our comfort zones... They are never in plain view. They speak to us from the margins of life, they speak to us from the underside, as it were, from the dark chaos that leans on our world.... Prophets speak to us from the wilderness... from the dangerous regions of existence, in which life is stripped of all

illusion... It is a landscape in which in order to survive one must turn around and look at one's humanity for what it is, and for what it is not. It is as if God speaks most authoritatively from the periphery, as an outsider as it were, perhaps to make us turn from our so-called "normal" lives and see things from a new perspective. I've always mused that God speaks perhaps most clearly in irony.

So what do we make of this prophecy we just read for today? Luke is quoting Isaiah, that the low places along the journey will be filled... and the mountainous challenges will be brought low, and the crooked and difficult paths made straight.... In other words all of life's complications and complexities gain clarity and purpose in the face of God's intention that all things will be redeemed and restored.... It is a call to courage for those who would listen.

So who are the prophets in our own day, in our own place and time?... Look, brothers and sisters, to the wildernesses of our world: Perhaps the prophet is the immigrant child separated from her parents and detained, held captive. Perhaps her cries of fear and loneliness is the voice of God. Perhaps the prophet is the woman who, as a child, was sexually abused by an older man of privilege with power over her; perhaps her cries of shame and anguish are the voice of God. Perhaps the prophets are the people of the Black Lives Matter movement who cry out for justice in the face of being profiled by law enforcement because of their skin color. Could their cries for dignity and well-being be the voice of God? And the working poor who work two,

perhaps three jobs, and still fall farther behind in the quest for economic security. What of their cries of frustration and despair? Whose voice is theirs? And the starving thousands, and the dead innocents of Gaza, and Sudan?... There is a veritable chorus of the voices from the wilderness calling for help; calling for hope.... It is God who is calling.

Brian Stevenson, a modern day prophet, tells us that as people of faith we must be proximate to the world's hurt; that we must go into the wilderness and tend to the ones who languish there. It is in proximity to the wounds of the world, brothers and sisters, where we will hear the voice of God. It is in the wilderness where we will encounter the living God face to face. We say we want to know the truth... well, that is where the truth is.... In the so-called poor side of town; where the drainage, the streets, the lighting are neglected; In the land of "out of sight and out of mind" ... the truth is out in the world where sanity is provisional. W.H. Auden calls it the "way of unlikeness"... out onto the periphery, where there is no safety net, only raw possibility.... Only the vibrant and dangerous Love of God....That is the prophetic wisdom proclaimed throughout scripture... How would the prophet, mere flesh and blood, know this? Because the prophet has been to the desert. The prophet is intimately acquainted with the wilderness; and the prophet has learned to pay attention; to pay attention to the signs and patterns of the times; the prophet has practiced for years the art of paying attention; because the prophet Loves, and Love knows the truth when Love sees it. This of course is no easy task. It requires rigorous honesty, and humility, and empathy and

compassion and patience.... And sacrifice. It requires that one let go of the need for certainty, and embrace possibility. The bottom line for the prophet is to believe that goodness and well-being and freedom always come on the heels of ruin and despair. We need to own that now more than ever... I believe that is good news for us who have been baptized into a faith tradition that seeks the voice of the prophet... Would that all God's people were prophets.

So in the midst of ruin and despair, comes John the Baptist prophesying that a new day arrives; he comes in a particular time and place: when Pontius Pilate was governor; when Herod was ruler; and Annas and Caiphas were high priests, he says. He's not just giving context; he's naming the tyrants under which his people are oppressed. He's making the typological connection to the time when the people of Israel were held captive in Babylon, and then repatriated to their homeland. He proclaims that the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth will reveal God's ways in earth, up and against the status quo... just as God has always done. But, Brothers and sisters, this coming of Christ, the incarnation of God in earth, implies our participation as well. The incarnation is not a once upon a time thing. It occurs in every generation, in every time and place. There are always the ones raised up to tell the truth, and act for it. Baptism then is not just an initiation into the life of faith, but it is testimony to the incarnation as ongoing; incarnation a process... At every baptism Christ is born into the world.... Born into the world to be driven into the wilderness, the dark corners of the human community...

driven out bearing all the gifts humankind possesses... Reason, compassion, empathy, imagination, kindness... driven into the wilderness to raise up those worn and wasted by the dark... The responsibility of salvation rests on us, good people.... It is the Advent of God's people coming to simply be the good and the sane for the world's sake. That is what we claim and celebrate in this darkening season... because the ancient prophecy is just outside our doors, waiting out there, for the claiming... And, having studied the pattern of our history, we claim that love is stronger than death... that good will overcome evil....that truth is inevitable... And sometimes, like the times in which we find ourselves, the wilderness comes to us... and that means that God is very near to us. It is a time to choose courage for the way ahead. It is the courage to simply be... to raise our heads and be the noble people of God. prophecy is always a call to be.

So an admonition for you this Advent... Pay attention to the voices crying in the wilderness... the worn and tattered voices that speak with the authority of God... Take courage in the wilderness, and leave your illusions there. It is in the wilderness where God makes a habit of showing up.... Seek your God in the dark, because it is from the darkness that God offers a word of hope... and a demand... a demand that the world is not as it should be, and that it must be set right..... And act when so called, dear people of God... act according to the love that is in you... Let your Love be a blessing....because in Love nothing ends in the dark... In Love, it only begins.