

God's Time, God's Place, God's People

If the church's preaching is supposed to be responsive to what's going on in the world, one might question hearing from the prophets Malachi and John today.

After all, it's the Christmas season, isn't it? The spiders are draped over Main Street, the stores in the mall are hoping that Santa Claus will draw shoppers there instead of to online stores, catalogs arrive in the mail every day, and there's that frantic feeling of "will I get it all done?" Is this the time to be preaching about repentance?

And this is America, where those hard-to-pronounce Roman names hardly seem relevant. We don't really care about that list of 2000-year-old rulers, we are tuned instead to the tweets of our elected leaders. What will they say next?

And those old people of the Bible—we've heard their stories before. They were important, of course, dressed in their robes and beards, conveying messages from God to the Hebrew people. But what could they possibly have to say to our far more sophisticated world of advanced technology, instant communication, and great diversity?

Is this really the time, the place, and the people for dwelling on the word of God which came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness?

Apparently I believe it is. I believe it is God's time to speak, and this is God's place to hear God's word. And we are among God's people, thanks in no small part to the ministry of John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

Let's start with the question of time. The gospel writer did his research so that he could tell us exactly when John went into the wilderness with his word from God. Tiberius was the Roman Emperor, the Caesar of the day. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, and under him was Herod Antipas, who had a powerful brother named Philip ruling nearby, while Lysanius simultaneously ruled another region. Caiaphas and his son-in-law Annas maintained control over the Jerusalem Temple. A total of seven Very Important People, VIPs, situate this story in time. This is not an ageless myth, this is rooted in history.

Then there is the place. John's life began in a town in the hill country of Judea, but his ministry took place in the desolate, uninhabited Judean wilderness around the Jordan River—far from the seats of power of those Very Important People. Pay attention to the voices in the wilderness, the prophet Isaiah said. Pay attention to the word that comes from the margins.

And then there are the people. The seven Very Important named People will go down in history, but it won't be for the good they did. Instead, the crowds who venture into the wilderness to hear and heed John's word will be the ones who carry it forward, who tell others what John said and did, so that the story is finally written by gospel writers like Luke and heard by millions through the centuries. So I ask you—who were the ones who made a lasting impact on the world? The Very Important People, or the common ones? Which ones were God's people?

This story is about God's time, God's place, and God's people. A very specific time, a very specific place, and very specific people. This is the way God works in the world. I submit to you that the

trappings of the Christmas season, the news generated by today's Very Important People, and our supposed sophisti-cation are the distractions, not the real thing. John's message is the real news and the most relevant voice we should be paying attention to in the year of our Lord 2018, in Bozeman, Montana, USA, as those who want to be God's people.

It is, as I hinted before, a voice from the margins. Many years ago an African- American preacher began a sermon on this text with the title, "The Strange Ways of God" and a twist which was contemporary at the time. "Dwight D. Eisenhower being President of the United States and John Patterson the governor of Alabama, J. Edgar Hoover the omnipotent autocrat of the FBI, Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale the high priests of middle America, the word of God came to Martin Luther King in the wilderness of America," intoned the Rev. Gardner Taylor. (quoted by William H. Lamar IV, *The Christian Century*, Nov. 7, 2018, p. 21) King would move from the margins to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial within a few years, from obscurity to international fame. Yet his word from God when he was in the wilderness still challenges us.

And we might take Gardner Taylor's suggestion, reading the names of our day's powerful players into the text to remind us that God's word is likely to be bypassing today's Very Important People, and sounding instead as a voice in the wilderness. Whose voice might that be? I'll let you think of possibilities. 2000 years ago, the time was ripe for God to act in history. The place was longing for God's action. And a servant of God accepted the call to be the one to give voice to God's word.

The word was "Repent." Turn around. Change your ways. Return to God's ways. The Hebrew people knew this message, for it was the message of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, Malachi, and all the other prophets. Remember the covenant, the promises we made with one another. Remember what's truly important, not the pretenders to importance. Turn to God, not to all those Very Important People who have no real power to save you. Give up your addictive behaviors which enslave you to the pursuit of money or the scramble for prestige. Stop worshiping the gods of getting ahead, getting more, and getting what feels good at the moment. Admit that all the money in the world, all the power over others you crave, and all the stuff you can acquire won't save any souls, bring any real happiness, or make anyone more whole. Repent. Live God's justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God, for God's reign is here. And you'll miss it if you are distracted by the world or by your own ego.

It takes both humility and courage to repent. Sometimes we acquire humility when we are defeated by the world, brought down by failure or shame. We are humbled. And in humility, we learn how much we need God. That's the gift of wilderness. But then the next step is one of courage, to try the new way of life God offers. It takes a bit of guts to reclaim the word "sin" and own it for ourselves and then dare to accept God's forgiveness and move on. Writer Debie Thomas describes this as learning to say something more profound than "I make mistakes sometimes," or "I have a few issues." Those are inadequate ways to speak of sin. John's baptism called for both humility and courage, a true change of heart, for as Thomas writes, "Sin is apathy. Care-less-ness. A frightened resistance to an engaged life. Sin is the opposite of creativity, the opposite of abundance, the opposite of flourishing. It is a walking death." (www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/currentessay.)

The call to repentance is a call to true and bold living, embracing the fullness of life God intends for all of creation. Christ offers that true life, that creative, abundant, flourishing, rich-in-joy-and-love, hope-and-peace-life for which Advent prepares us. It's so easy to be distracted and think that Christmas is about the presents or the feasting, the decorations or the bottom line. Christmas is about Life, the true and eternal life God gives us in Christ. Christmas is about the Love at the core of Life, the Love

which animates all creation. Christmas is about trusting that God is at work in this time and this place. And Christmas is our call to turn, and return, to being the people through whom God brings this message.

What if John had been afraid to speak up and speak out?

What if no one had gone out into the wilderness to hear him?

What if the common people had been so enthralled by the power of the Very Important People that they never listened or looked for another way, God's way?

Where would we be now?

My friends, God is counting on us to share his word of love and mercy with a world which desperately needs to hear his message. Our hearts need to be leveled to contain this word, our lives need to be emptied to receive this gift. But oh, when we do, then we are really living. Poet Dawna Markova wrote these lines on the night her father died.

I will not die an unlived life

I will not live in fear

of falling or catching fire.

Catching fire is what happened to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. He caught the fire of God's word, and the world was changed ever after. And the people he baptized—oh, they caught a fire which no amount of water could douse!

So listen to the voices from the margins, in the wilderness. Dare to join them in telling the truth about worldly power, and dare to live in faith in the One who was and is and is to be, the eternal One whose love gives life. Dare to change your own living, put your house in order so that Christ can move in.

And whatever you do, don't let Christmas distract you from Christ, the living word of God who is already here with us. In this time, in this place, and in this people.