

## **Believing is Seeing**

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on December 5, 2021**

**Friendship Presbyterian Church**

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“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.” (Luke 3:1-6, NRSV)

These last two years have been like no others. At this time in 2019, none of us could have imagined how the future would unfold, or what our holiday seasons 2020 and 2021 would be like. It’s been hard for all of us and made worse by the fact that our ability to be together and what we can do when we are ... all are up for discussion, just in the name of staying healthy. It’s been rough, and the wounds – of many different kinds – have been, and are, all too real.

To use a biblical metaphor, it has often felt like a long Exile, being loosed in so many ways from those anchors which make life rich and meaningful ... our families, our way of life, our customs and traditions. Lisa and I just had our first Thanksgiving back together with family in two years. Last year, we were at least able to “zoom,” and all things considered it worked out well, but it wasn’t the same. And we know that we were among the fortunate ones, last year and this one, mindful of the many forced by circumstances to spend the holiday alone.

It is into this common experience of “Exile” that a word of hope comes to us. The message of Advent is that our exile is not ignored by God, and that our long waiting is answered with the gift of Christ himself. That this is so, is the good news of the gospel which we confess, now as boldly as ever. And yes, it does take boldness to believe that, which is why we are confronted with the enigmatic figure of John the Baptist in our gospel text for the second Sunday of the Advent season.

Several years ago, those great theological provocateurs Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon at Duke Divinity School only half-jokingly suggested that there is not much wrong with the Church

that couldn't be cured by God calling about a hundred really insensitive, offensive people into ministry ... perhaps people like John the Baptist.

John the Baptist ... a camel-hair wearing ... locust-eating ... Jordan River-baptizing ... repentance-preaching Wild-Man! To us today, he may seem very odd, even an almost *comic* figure. But he *did* get his point across, didn't he? He managed to attract enormous crowds of people who were cut to the quick by his message of the coming Kingdom of God, and therefore, of the need for radical repentance.

Repentance is one of those good biblical words that for many of us has been sort of ruined. It may evoke images of hellfire-and-brimstone pulpiteers yelling "Repent! Repent!" at throngs of lost sinners and threatening them with eternal damnation. While there are people who probably should have the "fear of God" put into them, this is no gateway for the good news, at least not for most and not for this time.

Our English word "repentance" is a conventional translation of the ancient Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means a "change of mind" ... a change of consciousness ... a shift in how we perceive the world and our own lives.

They say that "seeing is believing," that many things have to be seen to be believed. Fair enough. But it's also true that there are some things which have to be believed to be seen ... truths of life and faith which are always right before our eyes – hidden in plain view – which we miss again and again.

As the poet Mary Oliver once wrote,

*the path to heaven  
doesn't lie down in flat miles.  
It's in the imagination  
with which you perceive  
this world,  
and the gestures  
with which you honor it.*

Repentance is about the imagination. It's about seeing differently. You know those optical illusions, where the same image can be seen as either one thing or another? A particularly famous one can be viewed as a venerable old crone in profile or as a stylish young woman looking away. Most of us see only one of the images when we first look at it, but with some effort, some imagination, some refocusing of our vision, we can get ourselves to see the other.

Repentance invites us to shift our imagination, to see a new pattern, to see the light sometimes hidden in the dark. The promise of the gospel and the promise of Advent is that as we respond to this invitation, we open ourselves to the joyous, liberating surprises of God. We learn to see again as if for the first time.

But all this is more of a *journey* than a destination. Every day since March 13<sup>th</sup> of last year – that day when we cancelled in-person worship for what we thought then would be just three Sundays – has been a daily struggle against anxiety, uncertainty, disquiet inside. And as the days passed into weeks, and the weeks into months, the struggle for many of us was a struggle for hope, for meaning, for connection, for a deeper sense of what makes our lives worth living. It's been my struggle anyway. And now, just as we thought we were in the home stretch of getting back to normal, we have at least the specter of new troubles to come, with word of a new variant that may delay things yet again.

But here's something I've found: As I look back over this time, I see something unexpected. I see how we have been carried and guided by a Presence which has never left us or abandoned us, even when it's been hard to see or feel that Presence in the present moment. If we – motivated by gratitude and not bitterness – stop and reflect, we will see how much we have learned about ourselves and about life, and how we've grown on the way.

Some of what I've learned, and the means by which I've learned it, has been painful, but rising above any of that pain is a far greater and deeper appreciation than ever before for the people in my life ... for my family ... for friendships ... for all of you ... and for the privilege we have to walk in fellowship and ministry together.

Even as doors were closed to familiar ways of gathering for worship ... even as we feared that we didn't know what we were doing, the winds of the Spirit swept over our chaos, stirring creativity and resilience, leading us into new practices, new models for ministry that will live on, long after COVID-19 is a thing of the past.

None of these blessings are lifted up to minimize in any way the losses we have endured ... the lives that have been lost. Lives are irreplaceable, and some losses simply cannot be recovered. But as we rightly name and mourn what we have lost, we also rightly witness to and celebrate that new life which begins even in the face of loss. And that miracle is not just something that happens in the timeless, ethereal realm of spirit, but something that happens to people in the midst of the *real world* ... real lives, real problems, and real heartbreak ... giving us the power to move forward.

In our gospel text for this morning, the one in which this new hope arises, notice how it begins:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness ...*

The word of God which will bring life from death, hope from despair, comes into real history ... to a *particular* time, a *particular* place ... to a *particular* people with their *own* story, with their *own* reasons to doubt that God still acted as in days of old. But those people in those days of

old also themselves doubted before the word of the Lord came to *them*. And so, the gospel narrator, in telling us of the emergence of John the Baptist, speaks of him in the words of a prophet of an earlier time ... Isaiah ... his words directed towards his own people who were facing their own crisis of faith.

Recorded in Isaiah chapter 40, they were addressed to Jewish exiles who had languished in Babylon for forty years ... their community barely hanging on. They knew something about loss. A thousand miles away, Jerusalem was in ruins and only a distant memory for the very oldest among them, and only a sad bedtime story for the rest. They were a people whose hope, whose very identity, had withered in the face of that reality imposed on them by the most powerful empire in the world.

But into this pervasive sense of loss, the lone poet speaks –

*Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.*

*A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
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.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 40:1-5, NRSV)*

This word is indeed a message of comfort and assurance, but it also is a call to *repentance* ... a call to the exiles to embrace what *must be believed to be seen* ... a call to believe and to see their lives in a radically different light ... to believe and to look beyond their present reality and see hope taking flesh in their own time.

And so, it is no accident that the gospel writer saw in *John the Baptist* a fulfillment in his own day of this voice to the exiles who cried out in his, for John knew that the one who was coming after him was the hidden hope of all the world.

In our world as it is, it may sometimes seem like madness to hope, with there being so many evident reasons to be anxious about the future. But we are a people who confess that the dealers of death do not have the final word, for we are coming to grasp that, in the very midst of this world, we are being held in the heart of God. And there, we are coming to see a *suffering love* more all-embracing than we could fathom ... a *steadfastness* stretching across all time ... and a *restlessness* which, in the words of Karl Barth, “will neither stop nor stay until all that is dead has been brought to life and a new world has come into being”.

And so, as Frederick Buechner put so well,

*... In Christ's name, I commend this madness and this fantastic hope that the future belongs to God no less than the past, that in some way we cannot imagine, holiness will return to our world. I know of no time when the world has been riper for its return, when the dark has been hungrier. Maybe the very madness of our hoping will give him the crazy, golden wings he needs to come on.*

To the glory of God! Amen.