

December 6, 2015

“God is With Us: In the Waiting”

Homily by Rev. Robert English



Luke 3:1-6

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."'

A few weeks ago my wife and I decided to take our 16 month old daughter, Olivia, to the library for our first family library trip. We walked into this wonderful space filled with life and books, joy and laughter. Because we have a 16 month old, we ping-ponged from one stack of books to another as we made our way through the toddler section.

After a little while of just soaking it all up we decided that we would check out our very first book as a family. As we browsed the section we found a book that seemed so perfect to our current life stage:

Waiting is Not Easy, from the Elephant and Piggie collection.

As we made our way to the check-out counter another new father commented, “Oh Waiting is Not Easy, oh that’s a good one, trust me, we are Elephant and Piggie connoisseurs.”

We quickly rushed home with this endorsement, unloaded our stuff and sat down for family story time. The story is pretty simple. Elephant is having difficulty waiting for something wonderful and unknown. Page after page Elephant is getting more and more restless as Piggie embodies the spiritual wisdom of patience.

Elephant’s groans and complaints grow louder and louder, until finally they witness what they were waiting for all day long, the glorious expanse of the night sky, to which Elephant replies, “This was worth the wait.”

As we read, I had this epiphany, a realization of how much I needed to hear this story laid out in such a simple and beautiful way, learning to wait in a frantic world, learning to cultivate patience in our on-demand culture.

We live in a state of constant flux and instant gratification. Our connectivity and technology allowing us to have access to media, information, relationships, social networks, all at the touch of a screen. We have fast food, text messages, Insta-Cart grocery shopping, and coming soon Amazon Prime Drone Delivery within hours of placing your order. Oh it is real.

It seems the more and more the world speeds up in satisfying some created need, the more and more crucial it becomes for the church, those who follow in the way of Jesus, to cultivate lives of patience, waiting, and longing, because we are crazy enough to hold onto this truth, that somehow, somehow, there is meaning in the waiting because somehow, somehow, in the waiting we meet God.

Now our world stands in stark contrast to the world and life of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is the quintessential Advent character. He embodies for us the purpose and meaning of this season and all of the spiritual growth that comes from living, with an open heart, in the midst of transition. John is kind of like a living paradox, someone who dwells in the ongoing presence of God here and now, and at the same time, in the new revelation of God yet to come. Both here and now and yet to come.

Typically when we picture John the Baptist we see him as a wild-eyed religious fanatic, who went out into the desert, shed the things of this world, ate wild locust and honey, in order to meet God, to receive God’s word and prepare the way for Jesus.

Now, this is an accurate picture of John the Baptist from scripture, but I have found that this image, with all of the extreme lengths to which John went to meet God, allow us as modern followers of Jesus to keep him and his story at arm’s length. It can be hard for us to identify with him, to see ourselves reflected in his story, to find some way to connect to this wilderness dwelling prophet.

But, perhaps, during this season, we are supposed to see John as a person who’s in between, standing with one foot in the past, in the present moment and an eye toward the future,

Maybe we are supposed to see John as the spiritual guide of transition, the spiritual guide of becoming, becoming a new creation.

Because transition is just part of what it means to be human. Right, we are beings who move through transitions.

If you’ve ever been between jobs, between relationships, if you’ve ever moved to a new home or if you’ve ever had a season of your life where you delved deeply within to find who God was calling you to be.... or perhaps at one point or another you just felt like there was something new just around the corner, something that you knew was going to be life-changing even if you didn’t quite understand how or why. If you’ve ever felt like this, been through this, then you can identify with John.

The writer of Luke gives us this picture of John, this man who is on the cusp of something new, but also he tells us of John’s context. The writer of Luke wants us to know some things about John’s story, when and where and how John came into his call to prepare the way for

Jesus. Luke lays it all out for us, giving us a detailed account of who was in charge, the political and religious authorities in power at the very moment when the word of God came to John.

In the 15th year of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate was governor, Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. These verses are very intentional and they are meant to point out two things to us as the reader:

1. God chose to speak to and through a man who lived on the outskirts of society; instead of all the folks in political or religious power. Apparently God likes to raise up people who don't quite conform to the powers of the world.
2. This introduction of John tells us that John is a prophet, in the same vein as the prophets of old; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the like. John is here to speak truth to power, truth in love, to show us that the world as it is, is not how it should be, to reveal the longing of God's heart for all God's people and the world.

And so, in the midst of this context, John withdraws to the wilderness, the fringes of the life, to the edge of the world, where John receives the word of God.

Now we don't know for certain how long John waited to receive this word, how long he was out there in the wilderness, but, I imagine it was longer than I would have liked to wait.

I like to imagine that as John went about his days, weeks, months and years, he lived with an open posture, an open heart, practicing an ongoing awareness of the Divine, plunging into the mysteries of this abiding, steadfast presence before receiving into his heart the word of God, this revelation and conviction which moved into action.

This is, more often than not, how God works. We think of it as an instantaneous moment of revelation, and yet, it actually is more like slowly marinating in God's grace, soaking in the abiding, ongoing loving presence and goodness of the Divine, even with only the smallest hint or notion or recognition that God is with us. But as we patiently open ourselves up, over time God slowly changes our hearts, God slowly opens our eyes and ears more and more, until finally at just the right moment we can see and hear clearly and we are ready to receive a new word from God and to move into action with conviction, love and hope.

It takes time. It means waiting. It means resisting the temptation to numb ourselves to contemplating the mysteries, wonders and hardships of life by binge watching Netflix.

It means going out into the wilderness, giving up the things that would take us away from God and the new thing that God longs to do in our lives. It means waiting patiently through the restlessness, with trust, with trust that God will work in this mess, will work in this transition.

And in time coming to see that God has been at work in this, the whole time, bringing about a new creation, a new order, and new life.

The meaning is in the waiting because in the waiting we find God with us and has been all along.

John, after receiving this word, coming to realize over time, the longing of God for our world, he re-emerges into the day to day of people's lives calling them to repentance. The word repentance brings with it some spiritual baggage. Some of us immediately go to the Hell-Fire and Brimstone preaching we experienced firsthand or through our friends who left the church behind because of its judgmental and exclusive ways. But, the word here translated to mean repent is the word *metanoia*, which means to change our worldview, to change our state of mind, to change our internal orientation.

John's repentance is about changing our internal lives to reflect God's loving intention for us and the world. He asks us to turn away from the false notion that the universe is cold and dark and meaningless and lonely. To turn us back to God, John speaks to us a word of truth. That the way the world is, is not the way the world should be. He reveals the longing of God's heart for all God's people and the world, for all people will see the salvation, the healing, the restoration of our God.

And oh, how we need to hear this today, in light of the shooting this last week in San Bernardino. This tragic event which has intimately affected our community and our brothers and sisters of St. Paul's United Methodist Church. We need to hear God's truth, the gospel, the Good News, God is with us even now, God hurts with us, cries with us, God comforts us, and speaks to us through wilderness prophets saying the way the world is, is not as it should be.

In the passage this morning the author of Luke quotes from the book of Isaiah, from the 40th chapter, which is written to a people in exile, those in the midst of dark times, those who felt far from the light and love of God. In this chapter we also hear these words:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is an everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths shall faint and be weary, and the young shall fall exhausted.
But they who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

Come Prince of Peace, come Light to all Nations, Come Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.

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