

WORSHIP

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Signs of Hope

The Reverend Katherine C. Kerr

John the Baptist was born just a few months before Jesus, and this morning's text recounting his prophetic activity, crying out in the wilderness, is not a prediction of Jesus' birth, but rather a preparation for his ministry. But still this is an advent text. We think so much at this time of year about the miraculous birth of the baby messiah, but the lectionary this morning takes us several years past that night in the cattle stall, to the weeks and months preceding Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry.

So listen to the word of God as we read it in the gospel according to Luke, Chapter 3, verses 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.'"



Long before there were telegraphs or telephones, eons before anyone could imagine a thing such as the internet or mobile phones, news traveled almost solely by way of human exertion. If a person or group of people wanted to inform another person or group of people of anything, somebody had to physically carry the message across the village or across the country.

In ancient times, when a king or ruler was planning a trip to visit one of his territories, it was a herald's job to carry the message of the king's imminent arrival to the leaders and citizens of the area. But the herald's job didn't end there. This person was also sent to prepare the citizens for the visit, calling them to straighten up and fly right so that they would be acceptable in the sight of the monarch. The herald served as a sort of inspector, checking the territory out for its suitability for a royal visit.

They would go around the city, noting where things were run down, messy, in need of attention. They would then let the community know what they needed to do to make the way clear for the arrival of the king.

In the gospels, the herald of the king's arrival is a man named John the Baptist. Of course, John is a different kind of herald than the people had been used to. He's no bureaucrat or civil servant. He doesn't arrive on horseback accompanied by a large party, and there are no trumpets or horns announcing his arrival.

Each of the gospel writers shares a little different perspective on John- in Mark and Matthew, he's what we would call a character- he's portrayed as living in the wilderness, wearing camel's hair clothing and living on a diet of locusts and wild honey. Luke shares an account of John's own miraculous birth to the elderly priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, before introducing him as a man in the passage we just heard.

As Frederick Buechner wrote, "John the Baptist didn't fool around. He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet . . . [and] he wore clothes that even the rummage-sale people wouldn't have handled."

He's not your regular herald. But then again the king whose arrival he announces is no regular king.



Throughout Christianity, John the Baptist, also known as John the Baptizer so as not to confuse him with our modern human denominationalism, has been understood as a New Testament prophet, a person chosen by God to speak to the people on God's behalf. John's particular role as attested to in scripture is to prepare the people for the coming of the messiah. In Eastern Orthodoxy, he is known as "the Forerunner" for his important role in heralding the coming of the messiah.

Like the secular heralds of his age, John also called the people to straighten up and fly right. But unlike those secular heralds, John set the stage for a fulfillment of prophecy through the arrival of this king, and he made clear that this is fully the work of the Lord and not of humans.

Using words that were no doubt familiar to his listeners, words from the prophet Isaiah, John proclaimed a message of hope into the wilderness lives of God's people.

It was a message they needed to hear, as they as a people were crushed under an oppressive Roman regime. And it was a message they needed to hear as they as individuals battled so many of the same challenges you and I do- illness and injury, economic instability, grief, fear, loneliness, uncertainty, apathy.

I daresay John's message is one we need to hear as well.

To be sure, our lives are different from those of John's original audience. The news of the coming of God to earth is not a surprise to us. 2000 plus years after that peaceful night in Bethlehem, we know the story pretty well: God came to earth not as a powerful monarch, but as a tiny baby born in a manger. This arrival upended everything humankind thought it knew about divinity and humanity. Nothing would ever be the same.

Yet here we are, in 2018, and it's hardly utopia. In the two millennia since Christ's miraculous birth, humankind has seen great progress. But in those two millennia, humankind has also done some pretty terrible things, and faced incomprehensible suffering.

In many ways, the world is better now than it was then, but the world still could be so much better.



It's a truth we all feel, deep down inside, one that nags at us in our workplaces where things can get stressful, in our homes where relationships can get strained, in our neighborhoods where challenges arise, and in our hearts where we feel the weight of the challenges of our lives and of the world. It is a truth that pulls us here, to this space and time set apart for worship, one of the few places in our lives in which we don't have to be in charge, don't have to have it all figured out, don't have to be anyone other than exactly who God created us to be.

It is a place in which we can hear and hopefully receive the words of hope of this Advent season – familiar words which bear repeating over and over again:

Every valley shall be exalted, 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.

No royal herald could make a greater announcement. No headline, no tweet, no Christmas card could offer more hope. John the Baptist spoke the greatest good news into the lives of people who desperately needed hope, and he speaks into our lives as well.

As followers of Christ, it is incumbent upon us to listen. To do our part to prepare for the coming of the king.

In 2016, a New Yorker named Matthew Chavez, despairing over the state of the world as he saw it, undertook a unique project. For some time, Chavez had been setting up a table and chairs either outside his apartment or in his local subway station, offering a listening ear to whomever wanted to talk. He listened as people shared their hopes and fears. He called it "Subway Therapy."

Chavez made it clear that he's not a therapist, and his intention was simply to be there to listen to people say what they needed it to say. And many people took him up on the offer, talking about their lives, their concerns, their anxieties, and also their hopes. His goal, he said, was "to encourage [people] to let out what they were keeping inside."



One day on a whim, he grabbed some brightly colored post-it notes and said to those who sat down and those who were rushing by, “express yourself.” What ensued was nothing short of extraordinary.

People from all walks of life took him up on the challenge, writing messages on the colorful 3x3 inch papers and sticking them on the walls of the station. Within a few days, more than 10,000 notes were written and stuck on the wall. After a couple of months, over 50,000 post-it notes with messages filled the walls of the 14th St/6th Avenue station.

Messages on the notes ranged, as you might imagine, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Many held messages like, “choose love,” “be strong,” and “you are right where you are supposed to be.” Others were longer, like “it’s time we start asking the hard questions and being open to hearing the honest answers,” and “find your hope and hold it close.” There were drawings hearts and smiley faces, unicorns, manatees and everything in between.

The spontaneous project went viral, and similar walls carrying messages of hope and kindness appeared in cities from Boston to San Francisco and beyond.

In response to the overwhelming outpouring of personal thoughts and feelings, Chavez has published a book that chronicles this project, and he titled it, “Signs of Hope.”

In the book’s introduction, Chavez writes:

The sticky note project has been called a visual representation of the voices of the people of New York: some confused, some scared, some angry, but so, so many that are loving and hopeful and inspiring and proud... [T]he wall has presented a larger opportunity for people who would not ordinarily interact or understand one another to connect, feel empathy, and find common ground.

It’s amazing, isn’t it? Something as simple as post-it notes in the hands of people going about their daily lives, passing through a subway station, became a beacon of hope in the midst of so many challenges. Whether people were concerned with their own struggles, the struggles of a loved one, or the struggles of a community and nation, in putting pen to paper, one at a time, they sent a powerful message of hope into the world.



There's no question that we live in a time of great anxiety, division, and struggle. The people to whom Jesus appeared also lived in a time of great anxiety, division, and struggle. It has, unfortunately, always been a part of the human story. But it has never been the whole story.

Advent is a season of hope, a reminder to us all that God came among us to save us – from ourselves and from the sin and separation that threatens our lives.

Last week, as our nation honored the late President George H.W. Bush, thousands gathered in Washington, D.C. and in Texas to pay their respects to a man who gave so much of his life in service to this country.

Television journalist Harry Smith, in reflecting upon the crowds at the Capital rotunda, said that it “looked like America, beautifully diverse, a quilt of many colors, of beliefs, and political persuasions.” He then remarked, “these last few days, it's felt like the nation has stopped to catch its breath, and feel again that maybe, there really is more that unites us than divides us.”

This Advent season, as we seek to prepare our hearts for the arrival of the messiah, we do so not with some sort of ungrounded naivete, not with some secular optimism, but as people of hope, whose trust is in something – someone – far greater, far stronger, far more loving than any human endeavor.

When Christians talk about hope, we are talking about so much more than just optimism or desire. Because for those of us who seek to follow Jesus, ours is a hope that is rooted in something eternal, something unchanging, something that is not subject to the whims of fate or human action.

It is hope rooted in faith, grounded in the vast history of God's redemptive work in this world, which started before creation and will never end. It is the hope about which the prophets spoke, it is the hope the people of Israel clung to in their darkest hours, it is the hope embodied in Jesus Christ and carried throughout the ages by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is a hope that promises that, no matter what, God is with us. Whatever has happened, whatever may be, our God rules the heavens and the earth, and our God will prevail.



One of my favorite songs this time of year, and really always, is the glorious carol O Holy Night. In addition to its beautiful melody, its lyrics are poetic. It includes what may be the most perfect description of Advent ever: “A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.”

This, my friends, is Advent. It is the thrill of hope this weary world so desperately needs. It is the promise that no disease, no betrayal, no addiction, no political battle, no natural disaster, no broken dream, no human failing defines our lives.

John called out in the wilderness- prepare the way of the Lord. For God is coming to lift up the valleys and smooth down the mountains, to straighten out the crooked and smooth what is rough. And all people in this weary world shall thrill to the hope of the glory of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

