

“DO NOT BE AFRAID: I – TO SPEAK THE TRUTH” (John the Baptist)
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Isaiah 61:1-4

John 1:6-8, 19-28

When I think back on my early Sunday School days, and think of all the Biblical characters we talked about, I can't, for the life of me, remember much about what they looked like. Moses was always portrayed as an old man with a long white beard, but I don't recall scripture telling us he looked like that. Mary was always shown as a tiny delicate woman with pink cheeks and long flowing hair, but again, scripture didn't tell us much, save that she was young. We know Peter and others were fishermen, so their roughened hands and weathered complexions probably bore witness to that, but we really have no record of what they looked like either.

Ah, but there is one person in scripture that we do know about and he is the central character in this morning's Gospel lesson, and one of the first persons mentioned in all four gospels – John the Baptist. Now, I'll bet that a lot of you can actually describe John the Baptist to me, right?

Let's see. He was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He was in the wilderness, and he ate what? Locusts and wild honey!

You see, we remember him, even from childhood, because he was special, he was different. Many a child in Sunday School over the years has had that “yuck” moment when the Sunday School teacher said John the Baptist ate locusts. Gross!

He was indeed a unique person. Here's some more interesting things to know about him:

He was Jesus' cousin. You might remember that when Mary was told by the angel Gabriel that she was to bear a child by the Holy Spirit and she was afraid, the angel comforted her by telling her that her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah had not been able to have a child for years and years and years, and then, when she was thought to be well past child-bearing years, she conceived and became pregnant. And the baby that she bore they named John – who came to be known later as John the Baptist.

Fast forward a number of years and we come to today's scripture passage, and John is in the role to which God has called him – paving the way for Jesus. He

spoke from the wilderness, calling all people to repent, for the kingdom of heaven was near! Well, suffice it to say, the people didn't like it, because when you tell someone to repent, you're implying that they're doing things wrong, moving in the wrong direction. And they didn't want to hear it.

Some who especially didn't want to hear it were the religious leaders. They actually sent people to confront John about his message, and you know what he said back to those religious leaders? He called them "you brood of vipers!" Not a way to win friends and influence people.

But that didn't matter, because that's not what John came to do. He came to prepare the world for Jesus, prepare them for a new world that Jesus would bring into being, a world of justice and righteousness, a world of freedom and peace, a world where all of God's children would be deemed worthy.

Jesus called John the Baptist a prophet, and if you know anything about being a prophet, you know that it's often a thankless calling. Prophets are called to speak the truth, God's truth, and sometimes people just don't want to hear it. Throughout his life, John continued to be faithful to his calling and it eventually cost him his life.

In a way, my friends, to be a faithful Christian is to be a prophet – one who points the way to Jesus, one who speaks truth in the face of the falsehoods of this world. It may be one of the most challenging aspects of following Christ – taking the risk to speak truth to a world that doesn't want to hear it, because it makes them uncomfortable.

I read an amusing little story this week that illustrates just how tough it can be to speak truth for God. It seems that there were two old country pastors who, one day, stood by the side of a country road holding up signs. One pastor's sign read: "The end is near!" and the other said, "Turn yourself around before it's too late!" As a car sped past them, the driver was clearly irritated at them and put down his window and screamed at them as he passed by, "Leave us alone, you religious nuts!" A few moments later, you could hear screeching of brakes and then a huge splash! One pastor looked at the other and said, "Do ya think our signs should just say, 'Bridge out!'" (On-line, LifeWay, "The Forerunner – John the Baptist," Joseph Vest)

While that's funny, what's not is the reality that that is the kind of reaction people tend to give to those speaking the truth from God. They're labeled "religious nuts," or "radical conservatives," or "radical liberals." You see, it's easier to throw stones at someone than to let their message touch your heart.

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, was a prophet of sort. He was ordained in the Anglican Church, but after a while felt like the Anglican Church had wandered away from the church God had called them to be. He felt like they had become too insular, caring too much for themselves and their cathedrals, and forgetting those who really needed to hear the gospel outside their walls. So he did something about it. He went out of the church and preached in fields, and in the prisons – and the powers-that-be in the church were livid, calling what he did “vile.” Imagine that! Taking the gospel to the streets and to those who were imprisoned was called “vile.” Why? Because Wesley was, in his own way, calling the church to repentance, and they didn’t want to hear that they were going in the wrong direction.

Friends, whenever we have the courage to speak God’s truth, it will probably cost us – because God’s truth is so counter-cultural in our world today. People squirm when you suggest they give rather than always focusing on getting. They squirm when you talk about justice and righteousness, especially for those who are oppressed, because well, they’ve benefited from others being oppressed.

You know, the United Methodist Church was built upon John Wesley’s passion for reaching out into the world, especially to those who are hurting and on the outside looking in. So, over the years, our denomination has spoken out against things like slavery, sexism, ageism, racism, and economic oppression. It has spoken up for women’s rights, civil rights and care for the environment.

Why, even today the United Methodist Church is speaking truth, because today in the United Methodist Church is Global Migration Sunday – a day set apart to remember the fact that more than 65 million people in the world are displaced from their homelands because of war or persecution – 65 million people! And, even worse, 10 million of them have no access to education, healthcare, employment or freedom of movement. I will confess to you that I had no idea the scope of the tragedy, how about you? It’s hard to believe we don’t know how bad it is – maybe because we haven’t been listening, or because like those in the gospel lesson – we didn’t want to hear it, because then we would feel called to do something to help.

Our church, the United Methodist Church, is calling us to repent for that. It’s calling us, now that we know about it, to do something about it.

John the Baptist stood in a long line of prophets – a line that continues today. Their job was and is to get people’s attention for God – to disturb them enough to do something. Even today, John speaks to us on this first Sunday of Advent as we prepare again to celebrate the birth of Jesus our Savior – and his word for us is the same as it was for them on those days long ago – “Repent! Repent!”

So as we begin this Advent journey, the question we need to ask ourselves is “From what do we need to turn away? What am we doing or not doing that is ungodly? How are we, or how are we not, being faithful?”

And maybe the second question is: “How is God calling us to speak truth to our world today? In what ways can we prepare the way for Jesus in this crazy world of ours?”

That’s a lot to think about, but that’s what Advent is all about. Time to think on the coming of the Savior of the World, and life as God means it to be. May the message of John the Baptist and all of God’s prophets stir up in us a desire to search our own hearts, turn away from what we ought not be doing, turn toward the truth, and speak it to a world that desperately needs to hear it, especially now.

It’s a daunting task, that I will admit to you. But as the sermon title today says, “Do not be afraid.” Because friends, we do not do any of this alone – the God who has called us to it, is the God who is with us on the journey – always and ever. So as you come forward for communion today, allow God’s Spirit to speak to you and guide you, not only in this Advent journey, but all the days ahead. May it be so.

Amen.