

December 6, 2009
Advent 2

"A Voice in the Wilderness Crying"

LUKE 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶ And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"

The late radio announcer Paul Harvey was fond of telling a story at Christmas to illustrate the importance of God speaking to us about his love. He told of a man who stayed home on Christmas Eve while his wife and children went to worship at the small church in the village where they lived. A storm was coming in. He put an extra log on the fire and sat down with a warm cup of tea waiting for his family to come home so they could open presents. In the quiet house he could hear the wind blowing through the trees and a strange thumping sound against the patio window. He stepped outside to see what the sound was and noticed birds trying to get into the patio window to escape the approaching storm.

He tried to chase them away so they would not hurt themselves. He even opened the door to his shed and sprinkled birdseed on the ground to encourage them to seek refuge in the shed while the storm passed through. The birds refused the help he offered them. "If only I could become a bird and speak their language and tell them of this place where they could find refuge, maybe then they would listen to him." Then it dawned on him why his wife and children were in worship on Christmas Eve while he sat home waiting to open the presents. They wanted to hear how much God loved them and rescued them by giving them his Son.

Yes, our God does speak to us about his love for us in words we can understand whether we are facing the last days of our lives on this earth or if we are a little child just beginning to put words together. As Martin Luther said of the Word; it is shallow enough in some places so a little lamb can walk and deep enough in other places so the elephant can swim. In the words just read to you we hear how the Word of God came to John the Baptist. He became a voice crying in the wilderness calling people to come and see God's love for them in Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The voice of God spoke to him and he became a voice calling people back to God, just as God's voice speaks to you and me here in the Bible so we can use our voices to lead people to the safety of God's love for them in Jesus whose birth we celebrate again this month.

The voice comes to us

The Lord our God has chosen certain specific people in certain specific times and in certain specific places to speak his words to them. Listen again to the beautiful description of how the Word of God came to John the Baptist. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconiti and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-during the priesthood of Annas and Caiphas, the word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the desert." The word of God came to John the Baptist in the desert at a specific time in history. It is the Lord who chooses the right time and the right place to speak his word through the right people.

These were the worst of times and the best of times for the word of God to come to John the Baptist. The Romans ruled the world with an iron fist with Pontius Pilate as governor of Judea. The Romans set up the evil Herod and his brother Philip, descendants of Esau, Arabs, as puppet kings. Power hungry Annas and Caiphas were high priests of the religious life in Jerusalem. If you think times are tough in California these days with the economy in the tank, they were much worse for people living in Jerusalem and Judea at this time in history. Yet, these were the best of times because 30 years earlier Jesus had been born in Bethlehem. Now John is about to introduce Jesus to the world as the Messiah, God's Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The economy can be in the tank, your life can be in the tank, you may be facing some of the toughest times you ever faced, but these are the best of times because God's Word is still with us to tell us about Jesus coming into the world, just as God's Word came to John the Baptist to tell him more about Jesus.

Think of other people in history who had the word of the Lord come to them in the worst of times. Look at Moses the former Prince of Egypt who finds himself in the Sinai Peninsula tending sheep at the age of 80. The Lord God appears to him in a burning bush and reveals himself to Moses as the great "I am" the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses heard the Lord speak to him. He heard the Lord call him to stand up to the mighty Pharaoh and lead his people out of Egypt. Because God spoke to Moses in words that were clear as the words that I am speaking to you right now, Moses could write down for us how the world began, and how Adam and Eve fell into sin, and how God promises a Savior who would crush the devil's power. Later at a certain time and place in history God would speak to a certain man named Isaiah and reveal to him that a virgin would bear a Son and call his name Emmanuel. Listen to how the first verse in the book of Hebrews describes this remarkable way the voice of the Lord came to people. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many and various ways." 2 Peter 1 tells us, "Holy men of God spoke to us as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

This past week when I visited my father, I saw the worst of times and the best of times. In the middle of the night, when I slept near him, I wondered if he was still breathing. Would he make it through the night? The next day he would be better. During one bad spell he wanted to sit up and have me help him to the kitchen table where he sat for an hour reading the Bible. He read from 1 Corinthians because he had finished Romans and wanted to continue his reading of the New Testament. I sat across the table and read as he struggled to see the words on the page. He read and reread them again and again. The worst of times come as the body slowly breaks down and death approaches, but the

best of times come as the voice of God's Holy Word speak to us from the past and bring us close to Jesus our Savior.

In one of our Christmas hymns we sing these words, "Come from on high to me; I cannot rise to thee. Cheer my wearied spirit, O pure and Holy Child." Jesus still comes to us, because the voice of God is still with us in his Word. How amazing it is that some of the worst of times are really the best of times because the Word comes to us just as it came to John the Baptist.

The voice goes through us

The voice that speaks to us also goes through us as we share with people the blessings we have come to see in God's love for us. John the Baptist passed on to others the messages the Lord had given to him. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John preached repentance. He told people how important it was to turn to the Lord and believe in the forgiveness of sins Jesus offered. He spoke with urgency because there was no other way to escape the wrath and judgment that were to come. People listened to the words of the Lord from the mouth of John and came to faith through his preaching of repentance faith. They wanted to be baptized. They invited their friends and family members to come and hear what John had to say. No cell phones, no texting, no radios, no television, no sticky notes such as we had this morning on the Sunday paper to invite children to Christmas for Kids. Huge crowds of people left Jerusalem on foot, hiked for miles down to the Jordan Valley and listening to John out in the open air.

What did John tell these people that changed their lives so powerfully? The prophet Isaiah had predicted what his message would be. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation." Picture in your mind people of ancient times preparing a royal highway or road to welcome their king when he comes to visit them. They roll away the boulders, fill in the holes, and do everything possible to welcome the king when he comes. Friday, I was driving through Santa Barbara from LAX and hit a pot hole in the freeway. I wonder how deep that hole will be after the rains come this week and how many cars will be damaged or get into an accident.

There are so many obstacles that get in the way of people receiving the blessings that Jesus has to offer them. Do you remember one of the first lessons you had in geometry? The shortest distance between two points is a...straight line. What are the obstacles or idols keep people from a straight line to God's blessings? Every human being is born with a huge obstacle or idol in the heart that refuses to accept God's love that wants to save us. We are born entrenched with the false hope that we can save ourselves by balancing out the bad we have done with certain good deeds of love and kindness. I recall Warren Buffet telling someone that his generosity in this life would help him have a better life in the future. Jeremiah describes the corrupt human heart that resists God as "deceitful above all things, who can understand it?" The blessings of this life can become obstacles to keep us away from the Lord if we value them more than the Lord. Pet sins of pride, anger, jealous and sexual sins can be huge obstacles or holes that keep us from the Lord and his blessings. Even discouragement, lack of hope and trust in the Lord can become huge

mountains that need to be removed for the Lord to come to us and reveal the blessings we have in Jesus once again this Christmas season.

"All men are like grass. And all the glory of man is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever." God's Word, the voice that came to John, still changes people's lives today. It changes your life and mine. Huge obstacles are removed, holes are filled, and once again we kneel at a beautiful manger in Bethlehem. Tears of joy fill our eyes as we look at Jesus and the forgiveness and peace with God we have in him. Lives are changed as we hear the very words of Jesus say, "Take and eat this is my body. Take and drink this is my blood."

If I could add to the story that Paul Harvey told, I would have the man who tried to rescue the birds remembering a verse he had learned as a child. "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." God's voice then leads him to put on his coat, hurry to join his family in church that Christmas Eve and worship Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem. Amen.