

Voices in the Wilderness

Isaiah 40:3-4; Luke 1:68-79

sermon digest

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As history edged toward the twentieth century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote his parable of the madman who stormed into the marketplace with lantern in hand crying, "I seek God! I seek God!" Atheists in the audience made fun: "'Has he got lost?' asked one. 'Did he lose his way like a child?' asked another. 'Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?'" Then the madman pierced the mockers with his eyes and charged, "I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are murderers." Finally he declared the death of God: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. . . .How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?" With these words the mockers were stunned into silence and the madman threw his lantern to the ground. He was said to have entered the churches in town with his *requiem aeternam deo* (eternal rest for God): "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"

For more than a century, Nietzsche has been a whipping boy in the churches he declared to be "sepulchers of God," but some observers of western religion have noted that the controversial philosopher was as much an observer of history as an advocate of atheism. No doubt Nietzsche was an atheist, but he was also an observer of the practical atheism that had permeated society with the dawn of the age of science. To the extent that anyone was listening, Nietzsche was doing the church a favor by holding up a mirror to life in the real world, and he expressed genuine concern that the demise of a vital religion would leave a moral vacuum in society.

Fifty years later, Nietzsche's philosophy reappeared in Hitler's myth of superman and again in the 1960's with the radical Christian theologians, who proclaimed the death of God. Nietzsche presented a view of religion that might have been heard as a constructive criticism, and his madman was not so far removed from John the Baptist in the Gospels.

John would have qualified for a Reader's Digest "most unforgettable character" story. He had that wild, "Unabomber," Theodore Kaczynski-look, like he might belong in a mental institution. Duke Divinity School's Brett Webb-Mitchell suggested that he would be a likely candidate for therapy and a prescription of thiorazine if he strolled into town today. His style of clothing hardly allowed him to blend into a crowd. John came out of the deep wilderness. Even his diet was revolutionary. To ask guests about dietary limits and preferences is a courtesy in our health-conscious culture, but anyone who dines on locust and wild honey and smells like a camel is not likely to become anyone's house guest.

Wilderness voices tend to get our attention. One of the few points of agreement in all four Gospels is the identity of Isaiah's voice crying in the wilderness with the preaching and baptismal ministry of John. John the Baptist is one of the characters who regularly appears in the passages of Scripture in the Common Lectionary chosen for Advent II. Even if we insist on staying with the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, we cannot avoid the importance of John in the Jesus story. In fact, Luke's Christmas story begins with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John. His story is about two miraculous births, including John with Jesus, and two special mothers. After the birth of John, Zechariah's song, the "*Benedictus*," one of four canticles in the birth narrative of Luke, anticipates the role of John as a trail-blazer for Jesus: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

As the voice crying "prepare the way of the Lord," John stands at the very center of Advent, anticipating the coming of God into our world.

John has all of the character traits of a con-man, a sensationalist who is out to get attention any way he can. Jesus came without a public relations director. He did not need help to create an image which could be marketed on the streets of Jerusalem. At least on the surface, John appears to be everything that Jesus was not. Even his message was of questionable value. Did not Jesus challenge us to refrain from judging/condemning others? You have heard the old saw about getting more flies with honey, but there was no apparent honey in John's message to the world. His honey diet did not leave a very sweet taste in his words. He came out of the wilderness scolding, condemning the norms and attacking the

establishment–Nietzsche’s madman.

Like the prophets before him, John stood apart both in appearance and thought; and he stood against the world, demanding immediate change. Every element of John’s appearance was strange, and that may well have been the key to his survival. Who really pays attention to someone who is obviously demented? John challenged the sole authority of the religious establishment in matters of faith. He attacked the ethical misbehavior of the people and demanded immediate evidence of repentance symbolized in his rite of baptism. He was crazy enough to challenge the personal life and marriage of the local monarch Herod Antipas. Then, in prison he dared to send disciples to inquire of Jesus (7:20): “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Although John’s challenge to the throne had fatal consequences, Herod was never quite sure that he was really done with John. Even in death, John was a demanding presence, and Herod’s primary fear of Jesus was that John had come back to haunt him. With all of that, John was a popular figure—so popular that the Pharisees tiptoed around him in their attempt to undermine the mission of Jesus.

Followers of John were so convinced of his integrity that a group of his disciples continued to be his followers long after Pentecost. In Acts 18-19, Paul’s companion Apollos was among a community of John’s congregation who were re-baptized in the name of Christ. Eventually the word in John 3:30, “He must increase, but I must decrease” became reality. The John movement did not fold so much as it folded into the Jesus story, bringing it to full circle from the calling to prepare the way of the Lord that is clearly stated at the beginning in the birth story. John never preached John. His message always pointed to the one who was to come. The absence of conflict between John and Jesus was rooted in a clear understanding of the difference between the message and the messenger. John is the messenger for whom Christ is the message.

The wilderness can be a strange source of God’s presence and word for our time. At a critical turning point in Christian history, as the institutional church was rising to places of authority and privilege with the endorsement of Constantine, there was an exodus of spiritual leaders from the cities to the desert. Early monastic fathers believed that their calling was to a lifestyle of contemplation and prayer. They were to be the ears of the church listening for the Word of God while the rest of the priesthood became more and more obsessed with having and controlling. They believed that the reality of God is far more apparent in the solitude and quiet of the desert than at the walls of the institutional idolatry that was beginning to afflict the Church.

Yale Divinity School professor Henri Nouwen has been a voice in our age to answer the critical question, why should we seek God in the wilderness? Nouwen identifies the desert with solitude, silence and prayer as absolute essentials in the spiritual life of God’s ministers, and he warns spiritual leaders of the church: “Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul (*The Way of the Heart*, p. 21.” He describes the work of the busy minister in today’s churches filling our calendars along with our lives with attending to the “musts” and the “oughts” that we have inherited. He borrows from Thomas Merton that our lives are driven by social compulsions: “Greed and anger are the brother and sister of a false self fabricated by the social compulsions of an unredeemed world (p. 23).” Somewhere, someone, some-why must declare a moratorium on the rat race to the top. Maybe, just maybe, God is dead to us because God does not reside in the high places of our busy lives so much as in the quiet recesses of the heart that we have to leave our “civilized” world to discover.

Old Testament scholar Walter Harrelson (*Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 210) notes a degree of ambivalence in biblical writers as they struggle with the wilderness. The desert was a place of Israel’s trial as they were led from Egypt to Canaan. There they were totally dependent on God both for communion with the spiritual presence and food from God’s table. With her son Ishmael, Hagar sought refuge from her angry mistress Sarah in the desert. Like the children of Israel, she was dependent on God to sustain her life and her infant son.

Jesus came from the wilderness. Following a desert experience and the “temptations,” Jesus entered into the public ministry of his calling. John came as the voice from the wilderness, calling for Israel to prepare the way of the Lord. Some believe that both Jesus and John spent time in the Qumran community of desert spirituality. The spiritual life of the Jewish Qumran community has come to us mostly through the Dead Sea Scrolls. John A.T. Robinson (“The Baptism of John and the Qumran Community,” *Harvard Theological Review*) notes that the major difference between John and Jesus was the location of their ministry. John stayed in the desert

expecting that any who wanted to hear would come to him at the Jordan River where the waters of baptism could be found; Jesus came eating and drinking with sinners, mixing with the people, walking the streets of the cities. We need both. Without John, the story of Jesus is incomplete. Without Jesus, there is no need or place for John.

In this season of obscenity with getting and having, we need to hear the voices from the wilderness, where people live on the boundary of starvation. In this season that demands a jolly face to the public, we need to hear the voices from the wilderness, where people are beaten down, oppressed, and dying. In this season of beauty spangled with lights and wreathes and trees, we need to hear the voices from the wilderness where life is surrounded by bomb craters and broken buildings. Maybe, just maybe, God is continuing to speak from the wilderness to any who still have ears to hear.