

INSIDE VOICES, OUTSIDE VOICES

Luke 3:1-6

Sunday, December 6, 2009 – Advent 2

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On Thursday mornings I stay home to write the sermon. And sometimes, when Amsterdam Avenue is especially noisy (which is most of the time), I put in ear plugs so I can concentrate. About a month ago I was in the midst of composition when I heard a very loud voice on the street. I couldn't see where it was coming from, but I got the message loud and clear. "Jesus saves!" "Praise the Lord!" the voice shouted. I responded with a phrase decidedly less pious. Since I already had the earplugs in, I went to step 2. I closed the double-paned windows. And when that didn't work, I went to step 3 and called 311 to make a noise complaint. Then I went outside to see who was raising such a ruckus.

There on Amsterdam Avenue was a large yellow truck with the words "Sidewalk Sunday School" painted across the side. They had set up chairs on the sidewalk and had gathered a group of children. On either side of the seating area were the American and Christian flags. And they had some of the biggest speakers I had every seen. "Religious nuts" I muttered to myself.

I wonder if anyone ever called John the Baptist a religious nut. I probably would have. After all he used to walk around proclaiming and crying out. And he did so wearing strange clothes, living out in the desert all by himself and consisting on a diet of bugs and honey. I suspect he looked rather like a lunatic. But God so often chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise (I Corinthians 1:27). And so God chose John.

Well, strange or not, the people flocked to see him. Maybe some of the appeal was the side-show quality of it all: "Have you seen the crazy man of the desert in his weird clothes?" Maybe it was the provocative and populist nature of what he said. Whatever it was, the people liked it. People in Jesus' day were actually more used to seeing such things than we are. Prophets were a mainstay of Jewish religion. Theologian Marcus Borg writes that (John) "stood (firmly) in the charismatic stream of Judaism." In other words, he was a person of the Spirit; other-worldly; a little strange.

So this strange man wandered around the Jordan River area preaching that a new world was coming and people better get ready. *'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.'

We hear these words every year at this time. They are the promises of Advent, those things for which we continue to hope and long and dream - a world made right. This is one of the building blocks of our progressive Christian faith. We delight, and rightly so, in this vision of a future in which the way to God is cleared of all human obstacles. We pray and work for the day when every valley of despair and hatred and need is filled in, and every mountain of prejudice and judgment and unfairness are brought low. We live in hope that that one day the road to the good life will be smooth and straight and wide enough for everyone. We call this the Kingdom, the Reign, the Empire of God.

And this promise of God is not something that we passively wait for. We participate in the Reign of God. We prepare the way of the Lord. And sometimes that preparation is manifested in direct action and protest and organization. We liberals are very good at this sort of thing. But sometimes, that preparation it is far more personal. Before John ever promised a shining new world, he called the people to look inside themselves and to repent. Luke says that John "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a

baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” For John, a world made right was inextricably linked to people made right. They were two parts of one whole. You really can’t have one without the other.

Repentance: this is a hard message to preach at anytime, but it is especially so during Advent, when lots of us have started celebrating Christmas. Somehow talk of repentance seems out of place, too edgy for the season. I suspect John’s first audience thought it was too edgy for them as well. Why do I think that? Because John called for a literal baptism of repentance. He stood in the muddy waters of the Jordan and invited people to wade on in. But asking them to do this was shocking, for although it was customary for observant Jews to take ritual baths, the only persons who were actually baptized were the Gentile converts to Judaism. Those born Jews didn’t need baptism. They were already in. But John had the audacity to insist that everyone, including the religious folks, needed a fresh start. Everyone needed to get ready for what was about to happen. Everyone needed to repent.

Is any of this making you nervous yet? If you are, it’s OK. Talk of repenting makes a lot of people nervous. It sounds so judgmental. It’s not very positive. It’s probably not the most efficient way to grow a church. And so we have left

most of the repentance talk to the sidewalk preachers and the religious right.

The unintended effect of all of that is that we have allowed the other side to define what repentance means for everyone else. And what we're left with is the notion that repentance is tear-filled news conferences or an emotional outpourings of guilt or feeling really, really bad about what you have done. But those things have very little to do with true repentance.

The Greek word so often translated as "repentance" is *metanoia*, the root of which means "mind." Attached to that is the prefix *meta*, which means "after," "with," or "beyond." Literally, then, *metanoia* means "after mind," or "second thought." It is the realization that something needs to change and then the action of "turning" and "moving in a new direction." It has very little to do with one's emotions, and everything to do with action. And for us to take that action has a powerful effect on us humans. In the psychological theory of Carl Jung, *metanoia* denotes a process of reforming the psyche as a form of self healing. What a wonderful notion: that repentance is self-directed and heals us. And when enough of us are healed, then so is the world.

It seems to me that this is exactly what John was preaching. He called for people to look inside themselves, to change their direction and then to work

for justice. Repentance and justice go hand in hand. You really can't have one without the other. An emphasis on personal repentance without any thought of the needs of the world will make you selfish. By the same token, raising your voice against injustice without seeing your own potential for culpability will make you self-righteous. In order to prepare the way of the Lord, you need to pay attention to the inside and the outside voice.

Dr. Daniel Yutzy, one of my college professors, was a towering figure in my early adult development. He was a peace-loving Mennonite who taught sociology. He had an easy way and infectious laugh, and his classes always filled early. I loved sociology and the way he taught it. He challenged us to be advocates for the oppressed. He raised his voice powerfully against poverty and violence and war. He was the first person I ever knew who insisted that the Reign of God had to be Good News for the poor and the oppressed or it wasn't really the Reign of God. I loved him and had him on a very high pedestal.

Dr. Yutzy taught me many things, but perhaps his greatest lesson to me was the transparency he showed one day. I had gone to see him at his home. I rang the bell and when he opened the door it was clear that he had been

crying. I found this disturbing. I asked him if he was OK and this is what he said: "James, today I realized, much to my shame that racial prejudice still lives inside of me." Well, you could have knocked me over with a feather. If anyone cared about the plight of minorities in this country, Daniel Yutzy did. If anyone could raise his voice against injustice, he could. He was a voice crying out in the wilderness. And then he concluded with these words: "But I have asked God to forgive me and to turn me in a new direction." Daniel Yutzy listened to both the inside voice and the outside voice.

And so can we. In our tireless working for justice, let's be sure that we're listening as well as speaking. Let's be willing to repent whenever we see that we are in the way of what God is doing in the world. Let's turn and walk in a new direction and prepare the way of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.