**Change Agent** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Second Sunday of Advent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 8, 2024

Are there any English majors here this morning? How about English majors (or others) who love poetry?

Fans of a *Prairie Home Companion* know that POEM stands for *Professional Organization of English Majors,* one of the beloved (and fictional) advertisers on the show.

As Keillor frequently said in the POEM adverts: *“English. It’s the language we dream in. If you find yourself filled with inexpressible thoughts and yearnings, maybe you should think about majoring in English.”*

Which reminds me of a story that professors of literature are sometimes fond of telling their student—a fictional story about (what could have been) *a great moment* in American poetry.

The story is about *Emily Dickinson*, the quiet and reclusive woman who was satisfied to live in a circumscribed world in Amherst, Massachusetts and *Walt Whitman*, the wild man of American poetry whose energy and sensuality and wide experience of the human condition were dramatically different from Emily Dickinson’s.

Although fictional, the story is based on *two facts*: the Dickinson family occasionally went to the beach for picnics; and Walt Whitman was fond of going to a beach, *stripping off all of his clothes* and *running in the sand* while yelling his poetry into the wind.

The professors then ask, with mischievous smiles on their faces, *“What if, one day at the beach, just after Emily Dickinson had finished spreading her picnic blanket on the sand, suddenly, flying over a sand dune and landing right in the middle of the Dickinson picnic, came a naked Walt Whitman. Who would have spoken first? What would that person have said? What poems would have been written by each of them afterwards? What a moment that would have been!”*

I share this with you because the appearance of *John the Baptist* is like Walt Whitman landing on the beach—*a wild and surprising character shouting his prophecy all over the wilderness and howling his message into the wind.*

Think about it: he must have shocked many people even as he attracted others. Hard to go on with business as usual or concentrate on your little picnic when the Baptizer bursts onto the scene. Nothing can remain the same after he appears. Either he is crazy, or he is onto something big. Or maybe both.

But the world is going to be *changed.* The valleys will be filled, and the hills will be made low. Or, as Clarence Jordan translates in his *Cotton Patch Version*: *“Make a road for the Lord in the depressed areas and make it straight. Every low place shall be filled in. Every hill and high place shall be pushed down. And the curves shall be straightened out and the washboard road scraped smooth.”* A radical vision of a world dramatically renewed and improved. *That’s John’s vision.*

You see, Zechariah’s son resigned from his hereditary claim to the priesthood and its iconic regalia, opting for camel-hair clothes and an eccentric diet of roasted locusts and organic honey. According to Henry David Thoreau, *“in wildness is the preservation of the world.”* This is often misquoted as *“wilderness.”* But Thoreau uses *wildness* to refer to an experiential and mental state of human beings, not a geographical phenomenon. John impels us to embrace *wildness* as a form of human freedom invested in the flourishing of others.

Ask yourself: *what if God is calling us to a wildlife—not an existence of convenience, settling, respectability, or compliance?* As Willie Dwayne Francois III put it: *“It is an existential tragedy to live high on public compliance but deficient of divine love.”*

John the Baptizer lives on the wild side. As geographer Rosemary-Claire Collard writes, *“A wildlife is characterized by openness, possibility, a degree of choice, and self-determination, in which beings are understood to have their own familial, social, and ecological networks, their own lookouts, agendas, and needs.”* John shows us that God optimizes the life of folks daring to do life on the wild side.

And Advent is a call to *go wild* for *love, integrity, and justice.* It endorses a tolerance for waiting, *but not at the expense of adventure*. We cautiously move through our days *too tamed, too domesticated, too programmed* to be open to divine intrusions. *What if we measured the scope of our spirituality by our experience of the presence of God?*

Luke wanted people to hear this message: *a different future was possible, and it was time to get ready to receive it.* George Santayana wrote, *“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”* John the Baptist preached a different message*: those who cannot imagine a different future will be condemned to be prisoners of the present.* What releases the power of transformation is the spiritual discipline of repentance.

Even the way Luke tells the story of John the Baptist is intended to put the *puffed-up, powerful people* of the day in their proper places. He wants to make clear that the important people are not really as important as they and everyone else think they are. *“In the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee,”* and Annas and Caiaphas were presiding as the principal priests, a drama began to unfold in which the lives of ordinary people would become *ablaze* with the light of God’s love. The locus of power would shift from the *palace* to the *manger,* from *Jerusalem* to *Bethlehem.* Off the screen of the rich, powerful and prominent, in an out-of-the-way place, something important and new was about to happen. John the Baptist had received word of it and felt compelled to share it, because it was too earthshaking for him to keep to himself.

Episcopal priest and educator John Westerhoff puts the message of John the Baptist in the language of contemporary parlance:

*“I invite you to ponder the possibility of receiving a telephone call from someone you have never met face to face, but because of the stories you have heard about him, you feel that you know him quite well. Over the years, you have confessed your love for him. You have offered prayers in his name. Today, he has called to say that he is on the way. Imagine what he is bringing with him. He is bringing every single thing you need to continue your journey into the dominion of God. His name is Jesus, but before he can come, preparations must be made.”*

John’s job, you see, was to *name* what needs to be done so that Jesus can enter *into the life of the world* and *our own lives.* The word John uses is *“repentance,”* which in Greek means *“to change.”* Change is not possible, of course, if you think you are just swell the way you are, but with a little humility and a lot of help from the Holy Spirit, *change is entirely possible.* *It is possible* for self-absorbed people to cease thinking of themselves as the center of the universe and begin to center their lives in God. *It is possible* to love God and neighbor more and worry about yourself less. To *repent* is to *turn* and look in the direction from which salvation comes and to do the work necessary to receive it when it comes.

As Joanna Adams put it: *“Repentance begins with the acknowledgment of the need to change, which then needs to be followed by a willful act of imagination. Imagine that through the grace of God, the completion of a whole new you is possible by the time ‘the day of Jesus Christ,’ as Paul called it, comes at last.”*

In the 1990’s Gail and I lived in Albany, New York, and we would frequently take a 30-mile *day-trip* to the quaint, historic town of Bennington, Vermont, where it’s almost impossible to get from one town to another without going over hills and around curves. *There are few long and straight roads in the state, and after mud season, many of the dirt roads are rutted and bumpy, like giant washboards.* Those hills and curves are part of the beauty and charm of Vermont, but it is frustrating to contend with them year-round, especially if there is snow or ice. So, it would be amazing to be able to drive smoothly and quickly without steep inclines or sharp curves or merciless bumps.

*And that is John’s point.* In the kingdom that is coming, the rough places will be smoothed out and the crooked ways will be made straight. But ultimately, it’s not highway maintenance he is talking about, *it is people and culture maintenance.* He is talking *not* about road improvement but about the creation of a world of righteousness, safety, justice and compassion, the kind of world dreamed about by *poets* and promised by *prophets.*

There is a highway in southern Vermont where many serious accidents happen because cars and trucks build up their speed descending a mountain, only to come upon a sharp curve in the road. The people living in the house near that curve keep a pile of blankets on their porch because they know there will be accidents regularly, and the victims will need to be covered while waiting for the rescue squad. Residents of the area have been petitioning the state for years to straighten the road out in order to prevent accidents and save lives. *John the Baptist seems to be saying something similar—the curves of injustice, immorality and inhumanity need to be changed into smooth paths so that everyone will see God’s salvation.* That is God’s plan, and it is not wishful thinking to proclaim it.

*Who is going to do this work?* It is God’s work, but at the same time, it is *our* responsibility to join that work. We pile up our blankets and respond to human misery, but we also do all that we can to remove the curves and injustices that cause so much suffering and pain. That is our *vocation,* easily forgotten amid holiday busyness and jolliness. It is serious business, all-important business, which is why John shouts at us incessantly.

But as serious as this task is, we can still approach it with *joy.* Whether we express our joy *quietly,* as did Emily Dickinson, or *exuberantly,* as did Walt Whitman, we are invited to share our joy by offering our praise to God and enjoying our eucharistic picnics.

And when we gather, *who knows what surprises await us?* That’s what this season of Advent is for—to heighten our awareness of God’s surprises, whether they include the surprise of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who are way too old to be having a baby yet bring forth John, or the surprise years when that same John appears in the wilderness. All of these events remind us that we can never predict when God will appear in our lives or what lies beyond that next curve or who is going to come leaping over that sand dune. *We’d better be prepared.*