

SERMON for Advent 2 - December 4th, 2022.

Readings: Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-21; Romans 15: 4-13 & Matthew 3: 1-12.

Last week, on our Advent journey, we met with the Patriarchs of our faith and thought on our own Patriarchs and Matriarchs, those people who made us who we are. We learned of their faith and trust in God, and their open obedience to go where God called them.

This week, on the second Sunday of Advent, we meet with the Prophets.

What is a prophet? Well, according to my trusty *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a prophet is:

1. a teacher or interpreter of the supposed will of God, especially any of the Old Testament or Hebrew prophets.
2. a person who foretells events
3. a person who advocates and speaks innovatively for a cause
4. *The Prophet* ie Muhammad – the founder of Islam
5. Joseph Smith – the founder of the Mormons, or one of his successors. ¹

I think I would like to go with a combination of the first three: “a teacher or interpreter of God’s will, a person who foretells events and someone who advocates and speaks innovatively for a cause”.

In our readings we hear from two great prophets, although there is a third prophet lurking in our story, as yet un-named.

First, in our Old Testament reading, we hear from the prophet Isaiah. This part of Isaiah was probably written to a disheartened people in exile, trying to instil hope in them. The people of Judah had been carted off to Babylon, and they were devastated by the thought that they would never return to their homeland.

Isaiah talks about a time when a new king would be anointed, who would be descended from Jesse, the father of King David, and who, if you like, would be the perfect king and restore God’s creation back to its intended perfection. It is a vision of paradise on earth, good news to a suffering people.

Like last week’s vision of swords being turned into ploughs and spears into pruning hooks, this week we have the vision of peace on earth, where:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. [Isaiah 11: 6-9]

A vision of Peace on Earth and goodwill towards all, a message which seems to grab peoples’ imagination at this time of the year!

In contrast, the second prophet we hear from is John the Baptist. John was certainly a prophet, and in a way, one could say he instilled hope in those who heard him, but his message was very different to Isaiah’s.

Some time ago, I came across a children's song about John the Baptist.... I don't know where it comes from, and I don't know the tune so, much to your pleasure, you won't have to hear me sing it. In reference to John's wild locusts, the author gave the song the title: "Bugs for lunch." Here are the lyrics:

"Jesus said John the Baptist was great
The greatest one who ever lived.
But if old John were here with us today
He'd tell us something like this:
If you're on the wrong road, go the other way
If you've got two coats, give one away.
When Jesus Comes, Prepare the way.
And don't forget the bugs."

It sort of sums it up doesn't it? Isn't it true that if John the Baptist were your child's primary school teacher that you would probably ask for a change of classrooms?

John really does seem to us to be such a contrast to Jesus, but actually, if we really think it through, we might find the contrast to be a bit overstated. John just may provide the best introduction to Jesus we can find. Because, although Jesus didn't wear camel hair, and it's true that he preferred a more Mediterranean diet, it is a mistake of the first order to think that Jesus was all sunshine and fluff.

In the time in which he lived,
Jesus was scandalous...
Jesus was radical...
Jesus was heretical...
And Jesus was downright rebellious...

In the midst of complacent contentment, the words of that children's hymn snaps us back:
"And don't forget the bugs."

The fact is, if Jesus were to return in the flesh, there isn't a Parish Council or Nomination Committee anywhere that would hire him as their next rector.

He dared to tamper with the social order...
He dared to confront the powers that be...
He dared to afflict the comfortable...

And... worst of all... he dared to tamper with their liturgy and to move the furniture around in the church. I'm afraid Church Office wouldn't know what to do with Jesus' profile. They would probably suggest that he stay out of pastoral work and stick to teaching in the University.

And we hear John shouting in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord."

I think that most of the time we think John says, "Prepare the way FOR the Lord...."

But he doesn't.

He says "Prepare the way OF the Lord."

There is a huge difference. We are called to prepare ourselves to make the way of Jesus to be OUR way.

When Christmas comes, don't be fooled by that little innocent baby in a manger, because with that baby comes the Word of God, and that Word should shake our very foundations.

The season of Advent calls us to re-think just how Jesus envisions this web of life he calls the Kingdom of God. If you read the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and then go away feeling like you just enjoyed a cup of warm chicken noodle soup, you might want to read further. I'm always surprised at how easily we fall into the trap of thinking church should be a place of comfort and security.

My dear friends in Christ, with Jesus it will never be "church as usual." If it had been church as usual, Jesus would have never faced the cross and we wouldn't be in this place this morning.

Jesus always has his bag of bugs.....

Jesus came into a culture whose rules of purity set up accepted barriers of separation among the people. It was the way of life... everybody knew it. But in defiance, Jesus ate and drank with those considered unclean... and he touched lepers... and he forgave the sins of those who would otherwise be stoned for their social impurities....

Who represents the officially unclean today in our churches? Who's on the outside today? This Jesus would stand up in our church conventions and conferences and synod meetings today and shout the same message as he did 2,000 years ago.

This Jesus, who tradition would have us believe, was born in the unclean environment of a barn and visited by the likes of unclean shepherds, is the Jesus whose way we are called to make OUR way. Jesus came into a culture that considered women and children to be material possessions.... But in defiance, Jesus scolds those who would hold back the little children and gathers them with a full embrace. He sits at a well in the very middle of the day to debate spiritual matters with a person who wasn't allowed to express spiritual opinions or considered to even have a spiritual opinion... namely a Samaritan woman! And he had the audacity to include women among his disciples....

Bring on the bugs...

I submit to you that such behaviour on the part of Jesus made John the Baptist look like a saint. In a world where racism was a natural part of the social world view, Jesus holds up the faith of gentiles and moves among and maintains his same demeanour whether he's speaking to the poorest of the poor or the elite of the elite. The Christmas stable scene that includes both labourers and the wealthy Magi is a powerful symbol of Jesus vision of a Kingdom where people are only seen as people-- with no other separating describers attached. It wasn't popular in Jesus' day, and let's face it, it's not all that popular today, but it is the Word of God!

No! It's never going to be church as usual.... We have chosen to follow the road of an extremist prophet, one Jesus of Nazareth. Following the way of this Jesus means that we will always seek to build a world in which all barriers to full humanity for every person have been removed. For do so, is the true worship of God.

As I said, today we are focusing on the Prophets. You could say that a prophet is someone who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the disturbed, and that would sum up what both Isaiah and John's messages, but it also sums up our third, un-named prophet - Jesus.

In my understanding, the job of a prophet includes: to have the courage bring warnings about where we are going wrong, challenging our preconceived ideas, but also to bring hope, hope that there is a better way, better times – peace with justice, peace on earth, peace with God ...

Who have been the prophets in your life? Who is it who has comforted you with a vision of a better life when you have been in crisis, and who has disturbed your complacency when things have been going well?

Let us also remember, to take on board on this stop on our journey, that we too are called to be prophets, give witness to our faith, to challenge what we see as being wrong and to be bearers of light, bringers of hope, to a world so often dark and confused.

Filled with the courage of the prophets, let us prepare the way OF the Lord! ... and don't forget the bugs!!

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
4 December, 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*
2. A sermon by Bill Adams posted on *gospeltalk* in 2001.