

You know how TV stations will have a run on certain types of shows—like when they have “Shark Week?” Well our scriptures for this week have a run as well. We might call this “John the Baptist Week,” or “Prophet Week.” The text for Sunday’s sermon (Dec. 4,) was the beginning of Mark in which a messenger prepares the way for Christ. John the Baptist was that messenger and he preached a message of change and repentance. The week continues with a look at the various ways that John the Baptist follows in the tradition of the prophets of old.

Prophets basically had two themes, and they tended to alternate them. The first theme is one of judgment. The second theme is one of salvation. You can see both of these themes at work in the texts about John this week. You will see that when John spoke for God, the message was not unitary. When needed, the message was scolding and even brutal. (See Friday’s text!) There were times, though when prophets soothed and assured and calmed. You will see some of that in this week’s texts as well.

Featured as special treats this week will be various writings and art works by Jan Richardson. Jan is the Visiting Artist at First United Methodist Church of Winter Park, Florida, serves on the faculty of the [Grünewald Guild](#) in Washington State, and is part of [Saint Brigid of Kildare Monastery](#), a community that draws from Methodist and Benedictine traditions, (Resource #2.) Things posted this week have come from one of the following sources. I invite you to explore the web-sites. Rev. Richardson has much to offer us as we try to prepare ourselves for Christmas through the season of Advent.

Resource #1 <http://adventdoor.com/>

Resource #2 <http://janrichardson.com/index.html>

Resource #3 Richardson, Jan L.; *Sacred Journeys: A Woman’s Book of Daily Prayer*; Upper Room Books, 1996.

Resource #4 <http://paintedprayerbook.com/>

Monday, December 5, 2011

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Psalm 126

The passage in Isaiah 61 turns out to be a much quoted passage by our New Testament characters. John the Baptist claims authority from this passage. He is “anointed” to prepare a way. He is a witness and is to testify. When asked by the priests who he is and why he does what he does, he responds that he is a voice of one crying in the wilderness—“Make straight the way of the Lord.”

John is clear who he is. He is anointed, (i.e., set apart.) He is a messenger. He is a voice. He is a witness and is sent to testify. He is NOT the Messiah, and he is not even in the same league with the Messiah. How many of us are that clear about who we are and where the limits of our authority lie? I must confess I am not as single-minded as John. I am frequently confused about where to speak boldly and where to offer words of comfort.

Even though I am an imperfect messenger, I nevertheless consider myself to be a messenger—a witness—one who testifies and points the way to one who is higher than I am.

I invite you this week to be aware of the ways in which you prepare the way. Maybe with words? Maybe with kindness? Maybe with reproof or confrontation? Maybe by grounding yourself thorough prayer and study so that you will know what to say when?

If the “priests” asked you, “Who are you?” and “Why do you do what you do?” Would you have an answer for them? Part of our human frailty is that we are often uncertain. Desirous of commitments we cannot accomplish—wishing that we knew what to do and when to do it. Enjoy the poem which reflects on the inner life of Mary after the messenger/angel left her.

Comments? Write me at cherylsmith@wesleyhuntsville.org

The Message

Take this message back:

That when the angel left I wept
That I thought I was insane
That I sat in the dark for three days
That I dreamed of stones
That I dreamed of angry crowds
That I dreamed I spread my arms to meet them.

Say on the third day

A wind through the door
Say the smell of perfume
Say fire
Say ancient, familiar music
Say I opened
Say I laughed
Say just a bit.

Resource #3, p.28

Tuesday, December 6, 2011

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11: 2-115

I am fascinated by the tone of the gospel reading for today. In this passage, John the Baptist has been imprisoned. . . .again. . . .by Herodius again! He is cut off from what is happening, and I wonder if his mind doesn't wander and begin to play tricks on him. He appears

to be doubting himself. In other texts, he has been so sure—has been a strong witness for the coming Messiah who is Jesus. In this text, he sends his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you the one or should we look for another?”

I am not surprised by John’s uncertainty. I am surprised by Jesus’ response. Jesus does not affirm who he is with pedigrees. He does not pull up information about what was prophesied or promised. He does not demonstrate his knowledge or any claim to fame within the Jewish culture. What he does is point to behavior. What he does is to present evidence. Look at the list of the people he calls up to demonstrate his Messiah-ship:

- Blind
- Lame
- Lepers
- Deaf
- Dead
- Poor

Not a very impressive list by our way of thinking! And yet, the Son of God used these to say, “Can you see God in me?” “Do you recognize my divinity?”

A hard question for us: Why would we think we should “stay to our own kind” when the Lord of heaven and earth spent his time with such as these? Advent invites us to cross a threshold into another reality. . . .the reality of the kingdom of God. Do we have the courage to cross it?

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Crossing the Threshold



Resource #1

Wednesday, December 7, 2011

Malachi 4: 1-6

Matthew 17: 10-13

The readings for today make us realize that all this took place in a totally different time. We barely know Elijah—just another character in a bible story. These people longed for Elijah

to return. They set a place at the table for him in every home during every Seder. People were always having “Elijah sightings.” Elijah was to them the signal that all things were about to be made right. So, what do we do when we read a bible text that we know we have no way of appreciating? It is obvious that we lack the family history and the cultural roots to truly appreciate the reference? Well, we appreciate the spirit, look for the metaphor and allow God to show us the timeless and the transcendent within that scripture. Don’t try to make it too literal—we don’t have the mind-set to do so. Just appreciate the depth of the longing—the ancient nature of the prophecy—the commonality 21st Century people have with those who long for things to be made right 1500 years ago. We are all people with similar hopes. We inherit a great heritage and stand in a long line of people who watched and waited.

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Blessing the Way

With every step
you take
this blessing rises up
to meet you.

It has been waiting
long ages for you.

Look close
and you can see
the layers of it,

how it has been fashioned
by those who walked
this road before you

how it has been created
of nothing but
their determination
and their dreaming,

how it has taken
its form
from an ancient hope
that drew them forward
and made a way for them
when no way could be
seen.

Look closer
and you will see

this blessing
is not finished,

that you are part
of the path
it is preparing

that you are how
this blessing means
to be a voice
within the wilderness

and a welcome
for the way.

Resource # 1

Thursday, December 8, 2011

James 5: 7-10
Zephaniah 3: 14-20

This scripture from Zephaniah has such beautiful images in it! First of all, it speaks of the Day of the Lord not as an awful day of retribution, but a day of blessing and of peace. And then we get to have the images painted for us of a God who rejoices over us! A God who exults over us with loud singing! A God who makes all things right—turns our shame into praise. And finally, the most beautiful image of all. . . .the promise that God brings us home!

I remember as a child being in the back seat of the car as mother and daddy would be driving home after being with friends. I would be rocked to sleep by the movement of the car and would only be vaguely aware of where we were. It just felt so good to be lulled into comfort by giving into the desire to sleep. And then, at some point—the arrival home—the gentle carrying in to my bed—the complete settling down into my place for the night. Carried home. Our God will bring us home and will sing over us as we are carried to our rest. Beautiful!

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Blessing for Waking

This blessing could
pound on your door
in the middle of
the night.

This blessing could
bang on your window,
could tap dance
in your hall,
could set a dog loose
in your room.

It could hire a
brass band
to play outside
your house.

But what this blessing
really wants
is not merely
your waking
but your company.

This blessing
wants to sit
alongside you
and keep vigil
with you.

This blessing
wishes to wait
with you.

And so
though it is capable
of causing a cacophony
that could raise
the dead,

this blessing
will simply
lean toward you
and sing quietly
in your ear
a song to lull you
not into sleep
but into waking.

It will tell you stories
that hold you breathless
till the end.

It will ask you questions
you never considered
and have you tell it
what you saw
in your dreaming.

This blessing
will do all within
its power
to entice you
into awareness

because it wants to
to be there,
to bear witness,
to see the look
in your eyes
on the day when
your vigil is complete
and all your waiting
has come to
its joyous end.

Resource #1

Friday, December 9, 2011

Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3: 7-20

Wow! These scriptures could not be more contrasting in their tone! The letter to the Philippians includes this reassurance: Rejoice! The Lord is near, so don't worry about anything.

When I read the invective in the gospel of Luke, I realize that I want to be in the crowd receiving the letter to the Philippians, and NOT in the crowd that John the Baptist is addressing! Most of us would consider that John puts a pretty fine point on it when he calls his audience a brood of vipers. . . .telling them that the ax is at the roots of the ancient and beloved tree. I would call this a scorching address!

So what is the difference between the two audiences? It appears that it is as simple as John addressing a group who has put their energy into legalism and appearances while Paul addresses a group that has put their energy into compassionate care for others. What shall they do? Share what they have by dividing it in half. Being fair in the prices they charge so that no

one is unnecessarily gouged. Being honest and above board—never cheating anyone. Being content with what they have rather than being driven by greed.

It really doesn't matter about anyone else. . . . which address would you get?

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You Who Bless

You
who are
yourselves
a blessing

who know
that to feed
the hungering
is to bless

and to give drink
to those who thirst
is to bless

who know
the blessing
in welcoming
the stranger

and giving clothes
to those
who have none

who know
to care
for the sick
is blessing

and blessing
to visit
the prisoner:

may the blessing
you have offered
now turn itself
toward you

to welcome
and to embrace you
at the feast
of the blessed.

Resource #4

Saturday, December 10, 2011

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

I Thessalonians 5: 16-24

We prepare for tomorrow's worship by considering joy. Rejoice! Celebrate the release of the captives. . . the bringing of good news. . . the sight, (insight?) of those who have been blind and on and on. If you have found joy in your spiritual life which spills over into your daily life, then the only sensible thing to do is pass it along.

Many at Wesley MUMC will be passing it along to the families of our community at Santa's Helpers today. If you cannot be present in person, then rejoice and say a prayer of thanksgiving for those who can. God will be present among us today at 700 Riverside!

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Blessing the Talents

There are blessings
meant for you
to hold onto

clutched
like a lifeline

carried
like a candle
for a dark way

tucked into a pocket
like a smooth stone
reminding you
that you do not
go alone.

This blessing
is not those.

This blessing
will find its form
only as you
give it away

only as you
release it
into the keeping
of another

only as you
let it
leave you

bearing the shape
the imprint
the grace
it will take

only for having
passed through
your two
particular
hands.

Resource #4