

Good News in the Wilderness

It was Flannery O'Connor who wrote, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you odd." Perhaps she had John the Baptist in mind at the time.

You have to admit, John is a bit odd. He appears in the opening verses of the Gospel of Mark without an angel, a wise man, or a shepherd in sight, wearing strange attire and spouting an even stranger message which, despite the first verse of Mark's Gospel, doesn't sound like "good news" at all.

John is definitely "retro." His leather belt and camel's hair coat are the same outfit worn by the prophet Elijah 800 years before him, and much of his message comes right out of the book of Isaiah. Though you and I might have trouble picking up on these cues, certainly those around him at the time wouldn't have missed them. They'd have pegged him right away for a divine messenger – dressed up like Elijah and quoting Isaiah – a prophet of the old school.

These days John would be advised to soften his image a bit. Market surveys show that people are turned off by obvious associations with organized religion. A new church being started in our area promises in its brochure to sing no old-fashioned songs, preach no old-fashioned sermons, and pass no offering plates, old-fashioned or otherwise. Everything will be high-tech, up-beat and cutting edge. If you like, you could text a contribution from your cell phone, but there is no room for John the Baptist.

Yet, if they would just give John the time of day, the critics of what's called "traditional Christianity" might find him more ally than foe. He is, after all, a critic of the religious establishment in Jerusalem with its elaborate laws and rituals. John does his thing "in the wilderness," as far away from Jerusalem and the trappings of the Jerusalem temple as he can get.

When people go to the considerable trouble of leaving Jerusalem to hear what he has to say, John makes no attempt whatsoever to add a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down. "Repent," he tells them. "Confess your sins and be baptized. Get ready now for the one who is coming after me."

By now John's message is familiar to you and me. We expect to hear a version of it from those guys with the bull horns who assemble at the C.K. Steele bus terminal at the bottom of Adams Street and announce to passing motorists that they're bound for hell. They claim they're preaching good news, too, in almost the same words as John, but somehow it comes over as something else altogether.

A few years ago, I attended the World AIDS Day service at St. Thomas More Co-Cathedral. The planners of the service kept liturgy to a minimum, knowing the people there would be of different faiths and of no faith at all (at least not the kind of faith that has a label someone like me can recognize). In fact, there wasn't supposed to be any liturgy at all – just some opening remarks, a speech by an imported theologian, and some closing remarks. Most of the evening was taken up by a string quartet playing divinely beautiful music. At the end, we all lit candles and held them as the quartet played Tchaikovsky.

I was grateful to the pastor of St. Thomas More for inviting us to have the service there. Not every Roman Catholic pastor is courageous enough and concerned enough about AIDS and HIV to invite a radical feminist theologian to hold forth in a cathedral, which, after all, is the seat of the bishop. (I did notice, however, that the tabernacle near the altar was empty and the door open – indicating that, liturgically speaking, God was off duty. Fortunately, there was no way to conceal the enormous crucifix on the wall behind the bare altar.)

I was supposed to give closing remarks, which I took to mean “give a charge and benediction,” which was what I did. There was nothing original about the words themselves, which are in fact a string of Biblical quotations. You hear them often:

Go out into the world in peace;
 have courage;
 hold fast to what is good;
 return no one evil for evil;
 strengthen the fainthearted;
 support the weak,
 and help the suffering;
 honor all people;
 love and serve the Lord,
 rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(See 1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Tim. 2:1; Eph. 6:10; 1 Thess. 5:13-22; and 1 Peter 2:17)

The next day, I got an e-mail from a gay man whose partner died of AIDS. He thanked me for what he called my “eloquent” words and told me that he had not been in a church since his partner’s funeral five years before. “His family wouldn’t let me sit with them,” he said, “And the preacher made it clear that my lover was going straight to hell. I swore I’d never darken the door of a church again, but for some reason I decided to come last night. Your words touched something deep in me, and for a long time after I heard them, I couldn’t stop crying.”

I wrote the man back and told him some good news: those weren’t my words. They were God’s words right out of scripture, and the voice he was hearing wasn’t mine, either. It was the voice of the fellow pinned to a cross on the front wall of that cathedral: the voice of the God who loves him.

Many of the words that John speaks come right off the scrolls so carefully concealed behind the tabernacle in the temple, but for some reason the citizens of Jerusalem hadn’t really heard them. The trappings – and especially the priests – had gotten in the way, I suppose. In much the same way, the trappings of church and the carrying on of ministers gets in the way today. We *listen* to the words, but we don’t *hear* them.

Some would say that the problem is ritual. If ministers didn’t say the words in the much the same way and at the same point in the service every Sunday, we would hear them better. But that’s a red herring. Without ritual, our lives would be in even greater disarray than they are already.

No, the problem isn’t ritual. The problem is our sense of hearing. More often than not, we hear best in the wilderness.

Ever spend the night in woods alone? You snuggle into your sleeping bag as far as you can go and draw the string as tightly as you can around your ears, but the crickets sing louder than the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and every rustle of the leaves sounds like an army of grizzlies bearing down on your campsite in search of a midnight snack.

When I was a little boy, our family camped out at Yellowstone Park. I was too tough to sleep in the trailer with my sisters. I planned to sleep outside, on a picnic table, under the stars.

As soon as I got the sleeping bag zipped, the first wolf howled. I woke up the whole family by pounding on the door of the trailer, shouting “Let me in. It’s too noisy out here!”

You hear stuff in the wilderness. You hear the truth about yourself and the truth about God. The wilderness can be a desert or an office cubicle or a classroom. It can even be a darkened cathedral where, because God is officially off duty, scripture can speak off the record.

What John offered the folks who came out to him from God’s official seat in Jerusalem was the news that it wouldn’t be long before God would be appearing in person in their own personal wilderness – appearing in a way so terrible and at the same time so wonderful that the world would never be the same. Someone – not John, but someone far more powerful – would be arriving any moment. “So,” he told them, “You’d better get ready.”

John offered them forgiveness if they would come clean – a chance to change directions, to start over again. He couldn’t have done that as God’s messenger if God weren’t anxious to forgive – an aspect of God’s character that gets lost in churches and cathedrals and other places where people are doing their best to avoid John’s unblinking gaze.

Just now, our national wilderness is being made noisy by women who are breaking out of a kind of bondage to bear witness to their abuse at the hands of powerful men. In the past, those men could drown out the voices of their victims by attacking them in some other way, or by buying their silence with money. Now, even money can’t buy silence in the wilderness.

The abusers can howl all they like. They can offer up their carefully-parsed non-apologetic apologies. They can even win elections, but they cannot escape the messenger who cries out in the wilderness, “Repent.”

We don’t like to be called to repentance, but we love the idea that God is anxious to forgive, and would come all the way from heaven, or from Jerusalem, from wherever else God spends most the time, into our wilderness. The people of Jerusalem loved that message so much that they confessed their sins and waded out into the Jordan to get washed down by John himself.

The ritual bath was John's own idea. The rabbis hadn't okayed it, and there weren't any prayer books to tell him how to do it. The people came out sopping wet and as bedraggled-looking as John himself, but they came out surer than ever that God had forgiven them and would keep that promise to come soon. I gather the idea of confessing their sins wasn't nearly so scary as the idea of spending another night in the wilderness alone.

I'm not saying, of course, that the one whose sandals John was unworthy to tie doesn't come to church. He does. In fact, he lays out a banquet for us today, and invites us to feast with him until that day when his presence is so obvious no one will want to stay away from church or from his table.

I know he's here because the church itself can be a kind of wilderness where people are facing trials of their own – where people are looking for food that sustains and drink that satisfies. In our own hunger and thirst, we forget that the person next to us on the pew might be as famished as we are. Making that person's path to God a little straighter helps us on our own journey. Sometimes that can be as simple as saying the words you've heard a thousand times: "The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you."

On the one hand, my point is this: if we only listen for God in church, we will miss half of what God is saying. On the other hand, since we're already in church, we would do well to hear the voice behind the words we've heard so many times before.

Good news can arrive in a darkened cathedral, in a white-stuccoed meeting house, and in the wilderness where you spend more time than you want to admit to yourself or anyone else.

The trick of hearing the good news is to remember that behind the howling wolf, the mud-caked prophet, and the inept cleric is the odd God whose love knows no bounds.