

Sermon – Advent 3 – December 13, 2015

In 1979 I was a 17 year old, fairly independently minded adolescent. I'd recently left high school and started work as an apprentice carpenter at my father's company. In that same year I had my first experience of God calling me. The great evangelist Billy Graham brought his crusade to Sydney for the second and last time. My church organized a bus and along with thousands of other Christians my family and I tracked out to the city race course to hear the great Billy Graham preach and to sing some of those memorable hymns led by George Beverly Shea. His rendition of "How Great Thou Art" still brings me to tears.

If you have ever been to one of Billy Graham's services, or another Christian revival event, you may have experienced the power of the Spirit at work. I sat high in the racecourse grandstand that afternoon listening intently to Billy Graham's sermon, and then as he reached the crescendo he started to invite people to give themselves to God. He invited people to repent and to make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. He invited people to come forward and make that commitment there and then. "Don't delay" he said "come now to take Jesus as your Lord and Savior."

Well for this young man, who secretly knew he was gay, and felt shame and guilt for those feelings, going forward felt like a release to me, like I would be forgiven. The power of that call was palpable and I distinctly remember not being able to stay in my seat. As I watched a person here and there get up and go forward, so I just got up and left my parents and our friends and went forward. And I stand here today because of that call. I've only experienced the power of the spirit calling me two other times and both of them have been in the United States, and have come after periods out in the wilderness.

Almost 2000 years ago in the second decade of modern time many, many people also appear to have had a similar experience of the spirit of God calling them to repentance and to a new life. John, the prophet, lived out in the desert on the eastern side of the Jordon River and as we heard Dean Michael describe him last week, wore camel skin clothes and ate wild insects and raw honey. I'm not sure how smelly he was because he seemed to spend a lot of time in the water of the Jordon baptizing people. This was a real phenomenon because we not only have the gospel recording of John's ministry but we also have accounts of John from Josephus, the well regarded Jewish historiographer of the later first century.

Can you imagine what it must have been like in those times to have had your heart stirred enough to walk out into the desert to meet a smelly holy man, to be washed in the river Jordon and to have your life changed. And all this without Twitter and Facebook to rally a flash crowd. Here was one of the first accounts of mass conversion if you will.

John was a prophet in the long line of apocalyptic prophets that culminated in Jesus prophetic ministry. He was a prophet that called people to see that the way of the world was corrupt and that a new way of living was possible; a way of living that would be a powerful antidote to the troubles of the world. He predicted that he wasn't the end of this line and that one more powerful than he, one that would have a more powerful effect on the world, a more powerful message would yet come.

Now John was a very in your face type preacher by this gospel account. I don't think the crowd was warmed up by the likes of George Beverly Shea. In fact John challenged them right from the get go with quite violent language. "You brood of vipers" he calls to them, "Who warned you to

flee the wrath to come.” This violent language can cut two ways. It can make you sit up and take notice, or I can make you dismiss the speaker as a crock, an arrogant so and so, that should be dismissed.

Now if I remember my encounter with Billy Graham I’m fairly certain he used similar graphic and violent language to create the necessary fear in me to go forward at his altar call, and to repent. Language that invoked a fear of hell, a fear of being left behind on the day of judgment, a fear that worked in me to repent of my sins and to want to be saved. It is powerful rhetoric that stirs our inner being to action. Sometimes it is this rhetoric that shocks us into action and gets us moving to make the commitment God calls us to make.

We live in a time where many people are being called to God by responding to apocalyptic language. The most graphic example we are facing today is the call by the radical jihadists of the extreme Islamists movement of ISIS and al Qaeda. People of all ages are being called by prophetic voices to the same desert region of John’s calling. People are being called to change their lives and to give themselves to the greater good, to create a caliphate in the desert, and to cleanse the world of the infidels as a precursor to God’s coming again. It’s a message many of us are concerned with because the message calls people to violent jihad and terrorism as their means of achieving their end goal.

To me there seems similarities with other religious groups of past and present ages that seek to bring on the end times rather than to live in the present and leave the end date to our God. Even Jesus tells us that only God knows the end time and we are not to worry about it. Christians of times past and present do not have clean hands here. There are radical Christian groups in the world today, many in the United States, that support violence as a way of bringing on the apocalyptic end to the world. A quick Wiki search yielded the names of hundreds of groups.

Power and violence and the corruption of the world are not new. But as each new expression comes upon us, such as the terrible violence and terror being inflicted on the world by ISIS, we react out of fear. This is being flamed by the rhetoric of some political people, who want to divide us in to the good and the bad guys, to name the scapegoat and to drive them out of our midst. But violence begets violence.

What are we to do you might be asking yourself? I think John gives us the answer right here in Luke’s account of the good news. The people ask John “what then should we do?” We can ask the same questions today as well. “What then should we do?” Firstly we should share our resources. If we have two coats let us share one with someone who has none. If we have food to share we should share it as we are doing by giving food to the St George food pantry. Secondly we should only take what is prescribed, or what is fair or what is needed. Take no more and leave some for others. This is justice in action. And finally when the soldiers ask what they should do John tells them to not use their power to extort money from others. For us we need to think about how we use power in the world against others. We all use power but John reminds us to be just in using it, to be satisfied with our positions and not to use threats and false accusations to get one over someone else.

We experience God calling us in many different ways. Some have their hearts stirred by the strong language of repentance and salvation. Some have their hearts stirred in the quietness of silent prayer and reflection. Some might experience the call of God in other ways such as in witnessing the beauty of our world, or in the encounter with one of God’s people.

It doesn't really matter how we experience the call of God to follow, to change our lives and to walk in Jesus' footsteps. It is in how we live out that call that matters most. John witnessed to the people that felt called by God and went out into the desert to meet John and to be baptized in the Jordan. That same message is as applicable today as it was then. This is the message we need to live into as we live in these advent times, remembering what it was like to live in the hope that God would come in human flesh. John's message is one of fairness, justice and satisfaction with what we have.

As we journey further in to this season of Advent, and as we contemplate the many people that believe violence is a way to bring on the end times, let us hold them, and us, in our hearts and pray that we might make a difference to the world by living into John's message and to the message of the gospel this day and every day.

Amen.