

Sermon – Advent 3 – Holy Trinity, Valley Stream NY

Luke 3: 7-18

In 1979 I was a 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. That year 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.

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 Holy 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 come forward and to give themselves to God. He invited people to repent and to make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. "Don't delay," he said, "come now to take Jesus as your Lord and Savior."

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 got up and went forward. I also got up and left my parents and our friends and went forward. I stand here today because of that call. I've only experienced the power of the Holy Spirit calling me like that twice since. Strangely both experiences have been here in the United States and have come after periods out in the wilderness.

Almost 2000 years ago in the second decade of modern time after the birth of Jesus, many, many people also appear to have been called by the spirit of God to repentance and to new life. John the Baptist was mostly responsible. As a prophet he lived out in the desert on the eastern side of the Jordan River and as we know lived a simple life.

John was one of a 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 of prophets and that one more powerful than he, one that would have a more powerful effect on the world, was yet to come.

John was, by this gospel account, a very in-your-face type preacher. I don't think the crowd that went out to see him 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 cuts two ways. It can make one sit up and take notice, or it 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 language to create the necessary feelings for us to go forward at his altar call, and to repent. His language invoked a fear of hell and a fear of being left behind on the day of judgment. It was a fear that worked in me. I wanted to repent of my sins there and then and I wanted to be saved. Often powerful rhetoric stirs our inner being to action and gets us moving to make the commitment God calls us to make.

We live in a time where many people feel called to God by a preachers' apocalyptic language. The most graphic example that we have faced over the last few decades is the call by the radical jihadists of the extreme Islamist movements. People of all ages are being called by what they hear as prophetic voices, some to the same desert region of John's calling. They 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.

There does seem to be similarities with other religious groups of past times that sought to bring on the end times rather than to live in the present. Jesus tells us that only God knows the end time and we should not worry about it. Christians of times past and present do not have clean hands here. There are radical so-called 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.

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 and the scapegoating of genuine refugees fleeing this violence, 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, to name the scapegoat and to drive them out of our midst. But violence, including violent language just begets violence.

What are we to do as people of faith? I think John gives us the answer right here in Luke's account of the good news when he answers the crowds similar question. 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. 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.

Finally, when the soldiers ask what they should do, John tells them to stop extorting money from others by using threats and false accusations. We too 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. We can learn how to live that call from Paul's message to the Philippians, which we heard this morning, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus".

The seekers that went out into the desert to hear John and be baptized received his witness to the coming of Jesus Christ. That same message is for us today. In these Advent times we remember what it is like to live in the hope that God will come in human flesh and dwell amongst us once

again. John proclaimed a message of fairness, justice and satisfaction with what we have and Jesus proclaimed the greater message of God's enduring love and forgiveness.

As we journey further in to this season of Advent, we might contemplate and pray for those that are lost and those that believe violence is the only way. Let us hold the hope that we might make a difference to the world by living into the teaching of John the Baptist and the apostle Paul, which is the message of today's gospel and epistle readings.

Amen.