

Second Sunday in Advent, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 10, 2017

Have you ever had a hard time knowing what to write? Maybe it's a boring email or a thank you note to an aunt you barely know. Maybe it's something momentous like wedding vows or something silly like a grocery list. In any case, I think that most of us know that feeling. The pen hovering over the paper, waiting for inspiration. The judgmental cursor, blinking at the top of a black page. Words sometimes don't come.

For a society that's oversaturated with idiotic words—vapid promises from nutritional supplements, false advertisements, presidential tweets,—it can be surprisingly hard to find words of significance. Or to find the right ones to describe what we're seeing out in the world. Or, put another way, it can be hard to find the words that are true.

I've heard over and over this year that there are simply no words for what's happening in the world. Sometimes people are talking about the cataclysmic storm season and the rising temperatures. Sometimes people are talking about new and frightening norms in political discourse. Sometimes people are talking about the powerful men being brought up short for their crimes. It can seem that we are living in a time that there are no words to describe. Words fail.

If you ever find yourself in need to someone to bring the truest words possible to a situation, may I recommend calling for a prophet. John the Baptist preaches out of the wilderness at the beginning of our Gospel today, powerfully, calling the people to turn their eyes toward Jesus, the one who will come after him. John is preaching to peasants outside of Jerusalem, but he could just as easily be preaching to us.

The prophet and the preacher sometimes find themselves taking time to describe the rough places in the world—maybe even the evil places in the world. But as I think about the people in this parish, I think you already know. I think you have a pretty good map of what's going on outside of these doors that God would not be too pleased about. John didn't spend much time describing the world as it is. Instead, he uses his words like a hot knife through butter and lays out a picture of the world as it ought to be—and, more importantly, of the one, Jesus, who will come to be our Saviour.

Far from being a voice of doom, I hear John shaking us out of our complacency, and giving us the words we need to describe the kingdom of God. John is a messenger of hope, and hope is a word we don't hear nearly enough about right now.

This is a Sunday when we usually talk about repentance, but my gut tells me that hope is the word that we need to hear this morning. John points us toward a hope that isn't silly or false; John points us to a hope that is gritty and true.

I don't think that he meant for us to turn our attention to God in only some kind of spiritual way. I don't think that he wants us all to go close ourselves in our rooms, lock the door, and throw away the key. The world is hurting right now, but it was also hurting in John's time. He was doing his ministry while his beloved country was occupied by the Roman Empire, and he was aware of the constant threat from that government and its soldiers. John was doing his ministry when the stratification of the rich and the poor was staggering and when the priests in the temple didn't seem to have any good ideas for how to help. I imagine that John sometimes felt like the world was in chaos just like we do.

I've heard other pastors talk about John as a scary figure or a strange figure. I disagree. I think that John comes with a clarity of voice that must have been an absolute balm for the chaos of his day—for the chaos of our day.

Imagine sitting at the edge of the River Jordan, and hearing this man preach—telling about the reign of God that is coming in the person of Jesus. Imagine, living at the margins of society, utterly destitute, and having someone welcome you down into the water to be baptized, to be made clean and singled out as God's own. Imagine if you are hearing a word of hope from this wild-eyed prophet—maybe the first word of hope you have heard in a long time. I don't care if he does eat locusts and honey—I think I'd be inclined to listen to someone who was able to speak so eloquently when the rest of the world was speaking garbage. I think that John's time and our time aren't quite as far apart as they seem.

Last week I talked about lighting one candle as a way to resist the darkness. Well, now there are two. The power of hope is growing in this Advent season, and we are here, this morning, preparing the way for the one who will come to bring hope to this world.

Those people at the river are just like you and me. They sometimes felt small, and they sometimes felt like they couldn't make changes in the big bad world. But John came to give them hope, and John comes to give us hope. The light is growing, and the darkness will not overcome it. The word will be made flesh, and the world will never be the same.

Listen to the hope that John preaches this morning. Let his words be for all of us who have a hard time knowing what to say or what to write. Feel the waters of the Jordan wash over you as a reminder of your own baptism. Rejoice that we are together on this frosty morning, preparing for God to be with us at Christmas. Amen.