

“And this is my prayer,
that your love may overflow more and more
with knowledge and full insight
to help you determine what is best.”
AMEN!

Byron Greene’s sermon last
week got me thinking about the tension
between the countdown to Christmas Day
and these holy days of Advent.

The word Advent means “Coming,” yet
our culture gives little or no attention
to anything but the coming
celebration on Christmas Day.

We hear much more advertisements
for amazing sales, no-interest credit cards,
and free shipping than we do about

the waiting, preparing, and repenting for
the return of Christ.

Even Christians look forward to celebrating
the baby Jesus in a manger more than
looking forward to Jesus coming in
judgment and redemption.

And it is no wonder!

I mean, who wants to do that?

That scares the wits out of people!

Yet, the prophet's goal is not to berate people or scare us to death.

The prophet's goal is to provide hope.

Even in the midst of turmoil, in times when it feels like evil is prevailing, and moments when it seems we are surrounded by leaders who are much more greedy than giving...

Even in these times...
the prophet brings hope and peace. (Pause)

Luke 3:1-6 sets the stage for John the baptizer's prophetic call.

The author gives the list of names listing the names of people with earthly power.

The world's "best of the best," you might say.

They all hold the authority and

the power and the wealth.

They hold the military prowess and
point to their heritage in order
to stay in command.

All these terribly important people Luke lists
mean something we don't want to miss.

They all had prominent seats of distinction.

They had the authority to
make people do things.

Remember the EF Hutton commercials?
When EF Hutton talks... (People listen!).

Now opposite of this "A List," we are told
about this "B List" character, John.

A person out there in the wilderness.

He went all around the region of Jordan
proclaiming a baptism of repentance for
the forgiveness of sins.

Why did he do that?

The Bible says it was because
the Word of God came to him.

The Word of God came to John, but it did
not come to the political power leaders,
nor did the word of God come to
the religious authorities.

Now I think that is something we need
to take note of because a lot of people select
their political leaders thinking they come
with the Word of God.

Ever listen to a politician
try to explain their faith?

It is quite sobering.

The words used do not match the actions;
most times it is obvious that they do it
to get votes and they sound scripted.

Still the earthly leaders retain their power
and the ones, like John the Baptist,
get persecuted and run out of town.

Why does the author of Luke want us to know
that it is to these (the persecuted and
the ones run out of town) are the ones
in which the Word of God comes?

The tension of Advent reminds us that
the Word of God came at the most
opportune time... a time of upheaval
and chaos, and it came to the displaced.

And it came time when people were crying out.

A time like today.

A time when far too many people have guns
and pull the triggers way too quickly. (Pause)

How are we repenting?
What are we preparing for?

I ask these questions to myself as much
as I ask them for you to consider.

How are we repenting and what are
we preparing for? (Pause)

On the list from Luke were religious leaders,
the word of God did not come to them.

That gives me pause.

After all, you'd think that the men and
the women of the cloth would get a dose of
the Word of God.

We keep worship holy, we roam the quiet halls of
the church and sit in the empty sanctuaries
on Monday mornings.

You'd think we'd be the perfect ones
for the Word of God to come...
but it won't, unless we're like
John the Baptist who lived in
the wilderness.

A place of chaos and danger but also
a place of formation.

The Word of God came to John in such a way
that people dropped everything to go out
to hear him speak.

There was something about what John said, and
how he said it, that told people it was
a Word from God.

Not from the politicians, not from the priests,
but from a strange fellow dressed in animal skins,
with a strange diet, and who
lived out there somewhere.

Who can explain it?

Nobody could it was just something
people knew when they heard it. (Pause)

Today and next week we hear about
John the baptizer's testimony and we'll
glimpse his integrity, so it is good for us
to pause and get to know John a little.

Luke wants us to realize that John
was a prophet just like Elijah.

A prophet who spoke the hard truths
to the people in place of power and prestige,
but spoke comfort to the politically powerless,
the economically poor and
the socially marginalized.

Two prophets, John and Elijah,
who brought hope to
the hopeless and the hurting.

To know John the baptizer is to know
Isaiah, chapter 40.

“Comfort, O comfort my people says your God.”
John's voice cried out and brought hope
to the people.

Peace to those living in the valleys of society.

The folks who have it rough on the street
living out of boxes, blue tarps
and suffer from gun violence.

Their valleys shall be filled, but the parts of society
that ignore them or blame them or
shame them while living on the mountain
of worldly power and success
surrounded by the luxuries of excess,

John said, those mountains will be made low.

Down from their false pedestals they'll fall.

“And the crooked will be made straight and
the rough ways made smooth.

John's Word from God brought gospel to
the ears for those living in the valley but
it was/is scary news for those
living on the mountain.

How do his words sound in your ears? (Pause)

During Advent in 1928, Lutheran Pastor
Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon
in Barcelona, Spain.

You may recall that Bonhoeffer, in 1945,
was hanged for resisting the Nazi party
and for plotting to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

In 1928 Bonhoeffer said, “It is very remarkable
that we face the thought that God is coming
so calmly,

where as previously people trembled at
the day of God.

We have become so accustomed to the idea of
divine love and of God’s coming as a
baby at Christmas that we no longer feel
the shiver of fear that God’s
coming should arouse in us.”

Bonhoeffer went on to preach that
“we are indifferent to the [prophet’s] message,
taking only the agreeable and the
pleasant out of it and forgetting
the serious aspect,

that the God of the Cosmos draws near
to the people of our little earth, and
[this same God] lays a claim on us.”

Bonhoeffer’s words, like John’s
called for repentance in order

to return to ourselves...

Return to who/what we were created,
for we were created “good.”

But many have gone off the trail of “goodness.”

Repent!

Bonhoeffer was right, like John the baptizer
he was preparing the way for the Lord.

Repent!

Regardless of how we feel about it
the Word of the Lord is heard.

We are carried away by it or
cleansed by it through fire.

When John the Baptist interrupted the political and
the religious establishment, people knew,
in their bones they knew,
that what he said was truth
and it would bring about
real peace. (Pause)

In closing,

“Walt Wengerin tells about a woman in
his congregation named Miz Lillian.

[Walt] never knew what to expect from Miz Lillian
when she shook his hand after worship.

On many Sundays she said, “Well,
you taught us today.”

On other Sundays she’d would look him in the eye
and say, “Hooo Pastor, you preached today.”

One Sunday, when she reached to shake
[Pastor Walt’s] hand he held it a little longer.

“Miz Lillian,” he said,
“Sometimes you say I teach.”

“Uh-huh,” She said.

“And sometimes you say I preach.”
“Mmm-hmm.” She rang.

Walt asked, “Is there a difference?”

Miz Lillian raised an eyebrow as if to say,
“Don’t they teach you this in seminary?!”

Instead, she replied,

“Yes, there is a difference.”

“What is it?” Wal asked.

Miz Lillian said, “When you teach I learn
something for the day.
I can take it home and, God willing, I can do it.

But when you preach,
[mmm] God is here.

And sometimes God is smilin’ and
sometimes God is frownin’.” (Pause)

People came out to hear John speak
the Word of God and sometimes God was
smiling and sometimes God was frowning.

Like the people who heard John and
felt the Word from God in our bones,
we also have a choice.

We can choose to live in fear or
we can choose to live in love.

We can get to work removing roadblocks,
put up to keep people down or
we can wait for God to blast them away.

Clearly, the political authorities and the
religious authorities are not
the final authority.

And we know it when
God's Word speaks;
God is here.

We feel it deep in our bones
and it chokes us up.

This is Advent, it can be the greatest feeling and
the most frightening to be cleansed by fire
and scrubbed with fullers' soap, but
there's hope in the final words today.

Hope for everyone with ears to hear...

“All flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

And the last I checked,
“All means All!”

AMEN!