

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 3:7-18
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7

December 16, 2018
The Third Sunday in Advent

Good morning! I must say I missed you all last week. It was hard to cancel service last Sunday but as the day went on and the snow piled up, I think we made the right call. However, it's kind of like taking a vacation, when you come back, you have even more work to do than when you left. You may have been out but the work didn't take a snow day with you. Or, should I say, the lectionary didn't take a snow day.

So, I am sure, like all good church goers, you kept up with your readings, following the progression of Advent so that today you would be up to speed with the life and times of John the Baptist. But, just in case you didn't spend last Sunday morning with John, I am going to catch you up today.

We are going to do a little back tracking this morning and review last week so that we have context for what John is getting at this week. I want you to notice three themes as we work our way through the narrative this morning: how we look, how we listen, and how we respond. Look. Listen. Respond.

Last week, John was in the wilderness.

What we know from the text last Sunday is that at some point after his birth, after his father Zechariah thanks God for the incredible blessing of a son...a son Zechariah says will prepare the way for the Lord and will give light to those who are in darkness, John goes into the wilderness. After some time has passed and he has gotten older, we are told in Luke chapter 1 verse 80 that...

"The child [John] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel."

The text implies that before John's public ministry began, he was spending time in the wilderness, learning and growing, strengthening himself. You might say he was looking. Looking inward at who he was and who he would become. That's the first theme to notice. Look.

And, we know that when God spoke to him, that John was ready to follow. In Luke 3, verse 2 we are told that the word of God came to John and then once he heard God's word he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John was able to listen when God spoke. That's the second theme. Listen.

Now, my old frame of reference for John was of a wandering disheveled prophet...clothed in camel hair and eating wild locusts – a man who was rather unkempt by most standards. A man

whose time in the wilderness was just that...wild. Artists throughout history rarely seem to depict John as well fed or cleaned up. He is often hunched over a cane, with a worn and tired face, skinny and weak. I never thought of his time in the wilderness as a welcome or productive place. I more often thought of it as the kind of place that was barren and unfriendly. The kind of environment that produced this crazy fire and brimstone prophet that came out swinging.

But the more I considered last week's text, I began to see something more gentle, more thoughtful about his time in the wilderness but only after I spent some time in the woods myself.

Last week before the snow came, I found myself walking through the woods with Dwayne deep into a game I like to call, "What kind of farm do I want when I retire." It was a beautiful fall day, the air was crisp, the sun was out. The only sounds you could hear were the leaves under your feet and the random bird flying overhead.

As we walked, we stumbled over fallen trees, walked through creeks, and navigated thick briar patches. Every so often, we would come up on a hill where we could get a better perspective of where we had just been. Without the leaves on the trees you can see the nooks and crannies of the land. You get a better idea of what's around you, of where you have been and where you are going. You can see what's possible. You just have to look around.

The more I looked, the more I could begin to imagine a road. I could imagine the rolling hills of a pasture below once some trees were cleared. I could imagine where the barn would go and where we could build a winding walkway up to a farmhouse. The more I stood on the hill top, the more I could see all of the creative possibility around me.

But, it takes work to see what's in front of you differently, to etch out a different, more productive landscape. Certainly, if I had stayed in the briar patches I would have seen something quite different than if I had gotten up on that hill to look around. Our perspective matters a lot when we are in the woods.

So, John's time in the wilderness is really interesting to me. I wonder what he thought about while he was there, what he encountered, what challenges he faced. Did he get caught in the briars or did he find a perfect vantage point from a hilltop to get a better perspective on what he might do? What did he look at? What did he see?

What we do know is that whatever he "saw" made his ability to listen all that more acute. He was prepared and the landscape he carved out of the wilderness was productive. Because when John heard God's call, he got to work. He responds. That's the third theme. Respond.

John's response is sure and strong. There is no hesitation or questioning. In the verse that follows, we are told he goes out to the crowds and begins to preach. And preach with conviction, he does.

Look. Listen. Respond. John's life was changed.

Like many of you, I watched the funeral for President George H.W. Bush. In the opening eulogy his biographer, John Meacham, described President Bush's life as a life defined by the opportunity to prove yourself worthy, worthy of salvation.

After being spared from death during WWII, President Bush would often ask "Why me?" Meacham states that for Bush, "his life was no longer his own. There were always more missions to undertake, more lives to touch, and more love to give."

He understood that life was about believing in causes greater than yourself, of choosing "the right over the convenient, to hope rather than to fear, and to heed not our worst impulses, but our best instincts."

These ideas bring us to this morning's text, to the culmination of our themes for today...when John, after emerging from the wilderness heard God calling to him and chose what was right. He lived into his best instincts. He began to preach. He responded so faithfully to what God needed him to do and you can imagine his conviction. That moment when you know you are called to something so much greater than yourself and nothing can hold you back. John was committed to living a life worthy of salvation. And he wanted others to do the same as he began to prepare the way for the Lord.

But as John is preaching, he notices that people aren't living by the same example. And he calls them out...you brood of vipers. You can almost hear his disappointment – as if to say...you're missing the point folks, this isn't how God wants you to live...You haven't been looking. You haven't been listening. You haven't been responding to God. You're missing your potential in this world!

The people seem truly confused. They ask, "What then should we do?"

I find his response quite simple yet painfully challenging. To sum up his words...just do what is right. Do what is right, right where you are. To the tax collector, take only what you need and nothing more. To the soldiers, don't abuse your power. To the crowds...share what you have. It sounds so easy but the people haven't been listening and they haven't been responding. So John, in his own conviction to do what is right begs them to take a closer look within their own hearts.

It made me wonder, what would John say to each of us? What would he direct you to do in your own life? What would he want you to learn if you spent time in the wilderness looking at your own potential, carving out a life worthy of salvation?

One of my favorite bloggers, Debie Thomas writes this about what John might say...

“What John is daring to suggest to his listeners is that holiness is not the ethereal and mysterious thing we tend to make it. If we're willing to look closely, if we're willing to believe that nothing in our lives is too mundane or secular for God, then we'll understand that all the possibilities for salvation we need are embedded in the lives God has already given us.”

In other words, you all have a role to play in God's kingdom. John is not speaking just to those crowds back in the first century. He is talking to each and every one of us...today. He is telling us to do what is right. Look. Listen. Respond.

And we might then add...serve where you can, give what you are able, worship when the doors are open, pray without ceasing, help those who need you. Do this all with conviction, with a heart that is open and grateful for the gifts God has given you. That's living a life worthy of salvation.

God has given you everything you need to make a difference in this world. Look within your heart. Listen to what God is calling you to do. Respond with conviction as you love and serve the Lord. Amen.