

WORDS FOR THE WILDERNESS - John 1: 6-8, 19-28
Third Sunday in Advent, December 14, 2008
Calvary Lutheran Church, West Chester, PA - Pastor Roy Almquist

The sudden crush of worshipers packing the small evangelical Shelter Rock Church in Manhasset, N.Y. – a Long Island hamlet of yacht clubs and hedge fund managers – forced the pastor to set up an overflow room with closed-circuit TV and 100 folding chairs, which have been filled for six Sundays straight.

In Seattle, the Mars Hill Church, one of the fastest-growing evangelical churches in the country, grew to 7,000 members this fall, up 1,000 in a year. At Life Christian Church in West Orange, N.J., prayer requests have doubled – almost all of them aimed at getting or keeping jobs.

[New York Times, December 13, 2008, Internet edition]

So began an article in the *New York Times*, entitled *Bad Times Draw Bigger Crowds to Churches*. Well, I am not sure if Calvary's worship attendance would reflect that trend, but the independent and evangelical churches generally see a dramatic upsurge in participants during *bad times*. Clearly, there is unrest in the land. We are in the midst of the worst financial downturn in thirty years, a war on two fronts grinds on, and most people seem to be putting in more and more hours to keep their jobs viable.

The challenge we face this Advent season is to speak a word that can encourage faith in uncertain times. I have no doubt that the statistics concerning the elimination of jobs has impacted or will impact members of this congregation. Many in our midst are not facing the prospect of the best Christmas ever this year. We may not be a congregation filled with *the walking wounded*, but many parents wonder how their Christmas can fulfill the hopes and dreams of their children, who do not read the *Wall Street Journal* or watch the evening news.

The Evangelist John, the source of our Gospel lesson this morning, does not begin with an angel, whispering in Mary's ear or shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Instead, John speaks of God and God's purpose in sending Jesus Christ into the world. For the Evangelist John, the good news of Jesus Christ began not in Bethlehem but in the wilderness of Judea with that strange man we call John the Baptist.

Half of our Advent Sundays focus on John the Baptist, perhaps to remind us that the message and the messenger are always outside of our control. This man, sent from God, whose name was John, came not to the Temple or the places of learning or the King's palace, but rather he appeared in the wilderness. Those who clung to the familiar missed both the messenger and his message. Only those who left their comfort

zone to listen to this strange, disheveled man were prepared to understand that God was, indeed, doing something new.

Our Gospel lessons for last week and today force us to deal with John the Baptist, a figure my friend Bob Linders, the senior pastor at St. Paul's Lutheran in Doylestown, calls *the barking Doberman, pulling on the chain, that blocks our path to Christmas*. Left to our own devices we would rather think about sleigh bells and reindeer and chestnuts roasting on an open fire ... but Advent forces us to listen to the man in shabby attire who came not to be the Messiah but to call our attention to the light that is coming and the values God would have us embrace.

John the Baptist was a *pointer* .. he pointed away from himself and toward Jesus, the Christ. Just as a point guard in a basketball game enables another player to score, so John set the stage for Jesus: *[John] came for testimony to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light* (John 1: 6-8). This morning we are reminded that before we can have Christ in our hearts we must come face to face with the barking Doberman, who convinces us that we need a Savior.

Since God normally sent prophets in troubled times, we should not be surprised that the scribes and Pharisees who came to John asked him if he was Elijah or some prophetic figure. John's reply to them was precise: *I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord."* [John 1: 23]

John the Baptist is a symbol for expectation. The great purpose of John's life was to point people toward the promised Messiah. I think it is fair to say that this is also our responsibility as believing Christians. We are called to live lives that honor Christ and call people to a saving faith in Him, or as we state in Calvary's Mission Statement .. *Give Glory to God and Share Christ's Love*. Everyday we encounter people who are a little lost and confused. We are called to give our quiet witness to the presence of God in our lives and how God can satisfy human need.

A few years ago, when I was serving as Bishop of this Synod, I had the opportunity to make an official visit to the State Correctional Facility at Graterford in Montgomery County. My host was the Director of Chaplaincy at Graterford, Chaplain Edward Niederhiser, a Lutheran pastor. Over lunch I had a chance to speak with the prison superintendent, David DiGuglielmo. I was intrigued when the superintendent stated that the major problem of the people in his institution is that they have a spiritual crisis in their lives.

These inmates are not here, he said, because they are poor or uneducated or come from broken homes. Many people have those experiences but do not commit crimes. Our people are here because they are spiritually empty and unless they can find a faith or a spiritual system to ground them, they will return again and again. [personal notes from conversation with Superintendent DiGuglielmo]

Spiritually empty. I think that can be said of many who will never go to jail but are locked up in feelings of hopelessness and despair. The people who traveled out into the wilderness to listen to John the Baptist believed that they had a spiritual emptiness in their lives and a need for something beyond themselves. They did not anticipate finding it through the established institutions.

What about us? Do we sense any void or spiritual emptiness in our lives? Evidently many people do and it is bringing them to church. Whether you are a visitor or someone who has attended this congregation for most of your life, I hope you will catch sight of the one John came to proclaim .. the light that has come into the world .. the light that we call Jesus Christ. I hope the people of Calvary will follow the tradition of John and point others to Christ.

This is the weekend when most people complete the transformation of their homes. The crèche goes on the mantelpiece, the tree is trimmed, and twinkling lights recast the front of our houses. Christmas cards are mailed and they start to arrive. One of the loveliest aspects of the Christmas season is that for a brief time each year we are permitted to soak ourselves in the recognizable and the comforting. In a world that is becoming increasingly alien, what a blessed relief it is for us to be surrounded by the familiar.

We need this Advent/Christmas season! Words of peace and hope are more than welcome on these dark December days when so much of the news is bad. But let us not get lost in the busy-ness of the season and in the wonder of the baby born in a manger. Let us remember that this infant grew up to be the greatest Light and the most valuable Vision that this world has ever known. He was a teacher, a healer, a miracle-worker, a friend, and ultimately the source of our salvation.

So, come, let us adore him .. and let us make room for the light of Christ to transform our lives. May we strive to be open to the miraculous in the everyday. If we only listen for God in church, we will miss half of the message. The good news of Jesus Christ is always beginning somewhere in the wilderness, for those with ears to hear and hearts to go where Christ may lead them. AMEN.