

That Prophetic Voice May Be Your Own

(Matthew 3:1-12)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea.*¹

That's one of the things I find fascinating about this particular passage: John just ... **appears**. Unlike Luke's Gospel, which presents us with a dramatic, detailed back-story for this transitional prophet, here in Matthew he simply shows up. When he does, he immediately gets to work – preaching repentance, baptizing, living out the words first shared by the prophet Isaiah roughly 700 years earlier.

The people were going to him, people from throughout the region. They were leaving their towns, their villages and their homes and going to see for themselves this person “crying out in the wilderness.”² There's no indication what drew them to John. Was it his clothing, or his diet, or the passion in his words and the volume of his voice? Whatever it was that had them go to the wilderness, for many life was changed forever. They heard the call to repentance and the invitation to baptism, and they answered.

Perhaps even the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out for baptism ... those met with skepticism and sharp words from John ... saw and heard something that ultimately resonated deeply within them. Perhaps some in those groups felt an inner change ... the next day, or the next week, or years later. The depth of that change isn't fully clear; as Karl Barth wrote, “[They] were in their own way awakened and even aroused and startled people, but they were so aroused and startled that they never even thought of submitting to the baptism of John.”³

But perhaps there was **something. Perhaps.**

In today's world, there are many calls sounding forth and many voices being raised. Calls to involvement. Calls to action. Calls to bring about change. Calls to stop change. Calls to buy. Calls to possess. There are even calls simply to pay attention to a particular person or group or cause. With social media and countless television stations ... with radio programs and podcasts ... with newspapers and magazines and the vast expanse of the internet ... we are **bombarded**. As I acknowledge all of this, I sometimes wonder about something: where are the modern-day prophets ... and with everything vying for our attention, would we even notice them?

¹ Matthew 3:1 (NRSV).

² Matthew 3:3 (NRSV).

³ Karl Barth. *Church Dogmatics: Index*, p. 275.

It was much easier for word of John to travel through the villages and towns of his time. There was far less noise at that time and so it was a simpler task to hear his voice sounding forth from the wilderness. Even before him, it was less of a challenge for the Jeremiahs and Isaiahs and Solomons and Elijahs of the world ... the prophets of their time ... to get in the faces of those being called. It was easier for the people to see and hear their prophets because there was far less in the world to obscure their vision and muddy their hearing.

But what about us, in our world, today? **Who** are **our** prophets ... and how do we hear their voices through all of the chaos?

In the language of the ordination service for priests found in the Book of Common Prayer, the bishop makes the following statement before laying hands on the head of the ordinand: "We thank you that by his death he has overcome death, and, having ascended into heaven, has poured his gifts abundantly upon your people, making some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry and the building up of his body."⁴ There's also a wonderful line in the Catechism of the Catholic Church which reads, "The whole community of believers is, as such, priestly, the faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood through their participation, each according to his own vocation, in Christ's mission as priest, prophet, and king."⁵

Gifts have been poured out abundantly upon God's people ... upon **us** ... to serve as among other things prophets. Through baptism **we** live into the threefold vocation and mission of Christ, a key part of which is the work of a prophet. Could it be then that some of the prophets we are looking for, some of the prophets who are calling out to us, are right next to us ... or next door ... or walking by us on the street ... or showing up somewhere in our lives?

Could the prophetic voices we are seeking, the voices calling people to God ... to community ... to service ... to compassion ... to love ... in fact be **our own**, and we simply cannot or will not exercise them? Perhaps we're not **ready** to raise them. Perhaps the **time isn't right** to raise them. Or perhaps we haven't yet been **called** to raise them.

This morning, as part of the **doing** I pray you include in this Advent season of **waiting**, I invite you to reflect on this. I invite you to pray about and spend some time in discernment on whether the prophetic voice we haven't yet heard is **yours**. Almost everyone has something about which they are passionate ... something in the world about which they care. It could be the environment. It might be community service. Perhaps it's caring for those in need. Maybe it's advocating for this church. It might be promoting the work done here ... our communal mission and community outreach. It might be participation in worship, or teaching, or liturgy. These may be your calls, or there may be others of which you haven't yet dreamed.

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 533.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. <http://www.turnbacktogo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Catechism-Of-The-Catholic-Church.pdf>

And for every call you may have within you and which is just waiting to be sent forth, there may be many, many others who want to answer those calls ... calls they are simply waiting to hear. A call that hasn't yet issued forth from the depths of this Shenandoah Valley wilderness. A call that perhaps you haven't discerned God wants you to follow and to make.

In Matthew's Gospel, there is nearly a generation that passes between Jesus' birth and John's appearance in the wilderness. In the briefest of spaces between chapters two and three, nearly 30 years passed. How did John spend those minutes ... and days ... and weeks ... and months? How did he spend his own season of Advent, his own time of waiting and expectation?

God called to him, and he answered. God led him to speak, and he spoke. God poured out his Spirit and John used it as the spirit of his prophetic work. How will you answer God's call? What will you speak?

How will you be prophets?