

**December 8-9, 2018**

## **"The Clowns of God"**

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**St. Lucas UCC, St. Louis MO**

**The Second Sunday of Advent**

**Luke 3:1-6**

**Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11**

Søren Kierkegaard compared the end of the world to a theater that had caught fire backstage. In the commotion, an actor dressed as a clown ran out to warn the audience but they only laughed and applauded his manic actions. After all, he was a clown and they thought what he was doing was hilarious. The clown shouted all the louder and that made the crowds laugh even harder.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard was suggesting most of God's messengers in the Bible are clowns shouting out a warning few seem to hear. There's something odd or offbeat about them that makes normal people discount their message. Perhaps you hear this story as another of those messengers. It would be easy to look upon John the Baptizer as just another clown from God.

Most of us in this season are ambling along peacefully toward the manger scene when John the Baptizer jumps out and scares the bejeebers out of us. When it comes to John the Baptizer, no doubt we think of the Judean wilderness and the wild and untamed personality living in a place so stark one is hard pressed to call it sustainable. Anytime visiting the wilderness area along the River Jordan, one can't help but imagine John the Baptist preaching to the throngs of people who trekked down to the river to hear him preach. John was an outlier warning people to get themselves ready for "the One who was coming."

Poet-storyteller John Shea described John the Baptizer this way: There is another pointer of the way, a map of a man, who when you try to read him, reads you. Unexpected angels are pussycats next to this lion, (blasting) a roar that once overrode Judea. You may not heed but you will hear his insistent, intruding, unsoothing voice.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus and John were the sun and moon to one another. One paved the way; the other came as promised from ancient days. They argued on the river's edge over who should baptize whom and Jesus pressed John with Hebrew prophecy of centuries before. They were the oddest of couples, this sun and moon in orbit together.

Storyteller Shea went on to describe the two as linked in the holy story: Opposite of the sought-after child in every way. The child was round, this one had edges.

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, originally published pseudonymously, *Either/Or, Volume One*, 1843, 30

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, "The Man Who Was a Lamp," *Starlight, Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long*, NY: Crossroad, 1995, 175

The child nursed on virgin's milk, this one crunched on locusts; the child was wrapped in swaddling clothes, this one was rubbed raw by camel hair. Yet they knew one another, even exchanged smiles. They shared a mystery, this hairy man and smooth child. Jesus came out of John as surely as he came out of Mary. John was the desert soil in which the flower of Jesus grew. John was the voice in the wilderness who taught Jesus to hear the voice from the sky. John would push sinners beneath the water and Jesus would resurrect them on the waves. John was the fast who prepared for Jesus the feast.<sup>3</sup>



John the Baptizer was formed and haunted by the Judean wilderness. The wilderness spoken of in the Bible is not a desert like the sands of the Sahara in Northern Africa but more like our country's southern border, a wilderness marked by arid and rocky terrain. It was the place where God had been creatively at work through the silence and the waiting. Will Willimon wrote, "(The) wilderness is not a place ... it's a state of mind ... a metaphor to describe a terrifying situation where wild beasts lurk. There are no clear paths, (instead, it's a place where) chaos, temptation and bewilderment reign."

John encountered the God of the prophets in the wide and silent desert. The wildness of the desert became for him a place of revelation. It was a place of conversion and a place of transformation. And like all revelations, it was a disturbing event because it demanded a response from him. It involved being "made over," in "being made new," or even in being "born again."

For John, the transformation went down to his bones, into the marrow of how his life was lived in order for him to fulfill his calling as a messenger. John had to *be* the message in order to *deliver* the message. The message of the desert is that all of us must submit to the revolution and submit to the transformation God has in store for us as well.

Did you hear his warning? "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." This is the central and insistent perception of Jewish faith, namely, that the world is upside down.

What John was saying is that, "The world is upside down and needs righting. What God is up to in his time, is that one is coming who will establish a new world where the wrongs of the world will be turned around."

Peace is not about maintaining the status quo. Peace is about striving to be empowered and transformed by the presence of God in our midst. To speak in favor

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<sup>3</sup> Shea, 176

of peace always is to find a dissenting voice, a voice that articulates what could be – what should be – for followers of Jesus.

On the promise side of John's preaching, we can recall the history of the ancient Jews who had received God's promises long before John came along, the people "who sang the song" as they held onto those promises. So John began his career by singing the old song again, by holding out the old hopes, even six hundred years after those words were first delivered by prophets of another era.<sup>4</sup>

Our work today, is to sing another verse of that ancient promise clinging to the possibility that God is still at work laboring to make the promise come true. Our calling this season is to prepare the way of the Lord.

So put on your gaudy polka-dot tie and silly hat. Put a big red nose on your own nose and break out those huge floppy shoes and join the circus. Take your place in the parade of circus clowns who are bringing the word to the world.

So what if no one listens? So what if most people won't listen to our message because we are just so many clowns in a burning theater. But take heart, some will. Some will listen and heed and that's all God calls us to do. We sing our song and the God of all songs will reach out to those listening for God's song to be sung.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Kate Huey, "Weekly Seeds, An in-depth reflection on next Sunday's Bible reading" from the United Church of Christ,  
<http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/258/Make-Ready-Nov-30-Dec-6.aspx>