

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas  
St. Margaret's Church  
December 6, 2009  
Advent IIC

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in your sight  
O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.

That voice was the voice of John the Baptist. He was probably not someone you wanted to come upon in a dark alley all alone, much less in the middle of the dessert miles away from any human being. You might have thought he was schizophrenic or at least mentally challenged in some sort of way. Or maybe he was just having a bad day. After all, a report published by the British Psychological Society in (2000) claims that 10-15 % of the population hears voices or experiences other hallucinations at some point in their life.

But Luke says that John grew up in the wilderness and certainly seems to have appeared more like an animal than a human being. Maybe that was because he wasn't around a whole lot of people growing up. That is until he heard the voice of God and was called to be a prophet, to preach repentance and prepare the way of the Lord.

And it all took place in the wilderness. That is where John grew up and learned to hear the voice of God. It was the only voice he could have heard besides his own. There was nothing else to distract him except for the heat and dust and wild animals and loneliness. Yet there in that wilderness God acted through John.

You know God acts in the wilderness a lot in the Bible. And so geography is very important here. When God tests Abraham, he's out on a mountain in the wilderness. When God speaks to Moses, he's out by some bush that only grows in the wilderness. When the Israelites are in exile they are in the wilderness, and God speaks to them there in pillars of fire. God provides food for them in the wilderness and cares for them. When God wants to speak to Moses and give him the Ten Commandments, he takes them to Mount Sinai, way out in the wilderness. They take the Ark of the Covenant to many different places and set it up in the wilderness wherever they are. There in the wilderness, the people of Israel learn how to be the people of God. They learn how to follow and trust and obey.

Turns out that Jesus spent some time in the wilderness too. He wasn't born in Jerusalem after all; he was born in Bethlehem requiring a journey through the wilderness. He doesn't spend time worrying about changing the hearts of Emperor Tiberius or Pontius Pilate or Herod or Philip or Lysanias or Annas and Caiaphas. Instead he went out to the poor and the needy on the fringes of society. If you think about it, most of his miracles and preaching took place in what we would call the wilderness away from the crowds, until they usually found him and followed.

We don't spend much time in the wilderness these days. Our lives depend too much on each other and on the stuff that we think we need. We need to be connected and in touch with the world around us. We need to have all of our devices to keep us up to date on every tiny detail happening in everyone else's lives, some of which is not even our own business. After all, Verizon doesn't have coverage in the wilderness and there's not even electricity out there, so how would I be on the internet to know what is going on in Tiger Wood's life or who's crashing White House parties or when we're going to reengage in war.

If I'm out in the wilderness I can't hear all of the voices that I need to tell me what to think and what to do. How would I know what to buy and where to eat and what to look like in order to be in the mainstream of America? I won't have a mirror, and so I might just end up looking like John the Baptist in a few months. It seems to me that we have this idea of what it means to be normal, but unfortunately I don't think that definition of normal is authentic. Rather it comes from outside of our spiritual and emotional and physical bodies - not from within.

None the less we feed from the deep trough of information that comes to us through so many voices. We're fascinated for days by what Tiger Woods did not say about his private life as if we own him and deserve to know the details. We're angered by two people who get to bump elbows with power at the White House in no small part because we'd like to be there too. We're addicted to Facebook and Twitter partly because we like the new form of community, but partly because if we're focused on what everyone else is doing in their lives, we don't have to pay as much attention to what's going on in our own.

But my friends if we stay focused on those voices, often controlled by a few powerful people, then what are we missing? If the only voices we are listening to are the ones on CNN or FOX, the Washington Post or the Washington Times, then how will we ever come to terms with what the our own voice is. And are we missing the voices of some who may have something to teach us? Or are the booming voices and microphones drowning out the other voices we really need to hear?

I believe we are daily missing the power and action of God that is working, not in the mainstream consolidation of power, but on the margins of our world. To find and hear those voices, the ones who have something to teach us, we must get out of being enamored with power. Those voices are different from our own. Those voices come to us when we least expect it and in the most unexpected places. Somehow we must create a place of quiet in the wilderness to hear them and to engage them.

Ok, so now hopefully you get my train of thought. You understand that I believe we need to calm our lives enough to do our own thinking for ourselves. But where am I going next? We'll I have to bring it right back home. Because the same thing happens in the church. Just as we are enamored with the power and feed at the trough of voices of information we hear pertaining to politics and power and celebrity entertainment and social responsibility, we do it in our spiritual lives as well.

We consolidate power in the church as well. We have certain ways that we think God should act here. Through beautiful music in this very sacred space. With vestments and brass and silver. With candles lit in the perfect order and with processions and prayers we've prayed for hundreds of years out of a book we'd give our lives for. Now don't get me wrong because surely I love all of these things or I wouldn't have dedicated my life to this line of work. I would give my own life for it and for the church. But perhaps there are voices I have yet to hear and new ways of worship I have yet to experience.

No, it's easier to sit on the sidelines go with the mainstream way of doing church. I wonder if that's too comfortable though. This is hardly the wilderness. I wonder what we're missing out there. What voices do we need to hear instead of the loudest ones.

Yes, you hear good preaching at St. Margaret's every Sunday, but I cannot live your spiritual life for you. Yes I can PRAY for you but I cannot pray FOR you. I can teach you forms of prayer and meditation and I can delve into scripture WITH you, but I cannot do it FOR you. Clergy and leaders in the church cannot spoon feed the Christian Life to you. One must live a Christian life. One must read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the word of God. We need community for support and in this community we certainly experience the love and radical hospitality of Jesus. But do we truly listen to one another and invite those other voices to join us at this table and teach us what they have to share?

This Advent what would happen if we paid more attention to the people and voices on the fringes of our lives than the voices of those in power? What would happen if we sent the cameras into the wilderness and gave the microphones to those whose voices are not as strong as those of John. I believe the prophetic voices of our day, the voices we so long to hear, are speaking, but we simply are not listening. And maybe if we listened for them, we might be like the people who were drawn to John to hear his message. We will find ways to repent and return to the Lord and be baptized and start anew

If we pay attention this Advent and prepare our ears to hear, we can hear the still small voice of God. That voice speaks the word, and all is created. That voice speaks the word and the word becomes flesh and dwells among us, Emmanuel. That voice will speak the words that bring strength to the weary and sight to the blind. That voice will give power to the weak and set the prisoners free. Then finally the Spirit will fill every valley, 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. Amen.

<http://www.enotalone.com/article/3109.html>