

Faith Mennonite Church
Advent 3, December 16, 2007

“What did you go out to see?”

Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

It's the third week of Advent and we continue to wait. Some of us may be feeling worn down by the hectic pace of the season, by the extra energy and time it takes to put on sufficient layers of clothes and boots before venturing outside, or by the constant talk of political primaries, which haven't yet begun but seem to have been going on far too long now.

John the Baptist also waited, impatiently, in jail, trying to figure out what was going on. He had preached repentance and baptized folks to get them ready for the imminent eschaton – the coming of a Messiah who would redeem, bring liberation and judgment. He had baptized Jesus and predicted that he would have a “winnowing fork in his hand, and would clear his threshing floor, gather the wheat into the granary and leave the chaff to burn with unquenchable fire.” John was a prophet—a fiery prophet—he expected God's wrath to take out the oppressive forces and bring in a new day. God's people, the faithful, were to end up on top, victorious. But there he sat in prison. We can understand his self-doubt and discouragement.

John's disciples were evidently able to visit him in prison. As John's impatience and maybe disillusionment grow he sends some of his disciples on a mission: ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah. “Are you the one we've been waiting for, or should we wait for another?” I can imagine the subtext just below the surface of that question: “Are you going to make a move and get me out of prison and prove my prophecies correct? Or am I going to remain here and wait for someone else?” It's the question that always comes up in the midst of tragedy and suffering. Why? How long? Where is God?

Jesus doesn't answer John's question straight on but rather says: “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Jesus does several things with this response. First, he proclaims that the kingdom *is* at hand because these signs of the kingdom are visible and happening. Second, he elevates the messianic vision of the peaceable kingdom, found in the Old Testament prophetic writing, including our text this morning from Isaiah chapter 35, above a vision of hell-fire and brimstone. And third, by calling anyone blessed who doesn't take offense at him and the vision that he lives out in the midst of poverty and oppression, he reminds his followers that signs of the kingdom and a vision of future shalom do not mean that suffering and pain miraculously end. Rather these are God's mysterious path to liberation and redemption.

Then, as if to reassure his own disciples, and those listening in, Jesus asks them: Really now, what were you looking for when you went out to the desert to follow John? Were you hoping to get a new T-shirt and his latest CD? Were you expecting him to be dressed like

royalty, offering a fancy *hors d'oeuvre* reception, like you'd find at one of Herod's palaces out the same desert region? Did you want to follow a political hack who switched his story every time a new poll came out, just like the reeds that waved in the breeze along the Jordan river?

No, you were hungry for a prophet. You were hungry for someone who could strip away the layers of self-protection and self-deception. You wanted to be inspired, to have someone push you to do things that make a difference in the world. You wanted liberation, to be freed from the trap of materialism like John was, dressed in skins and feasting on locusts.

This was the message Jesus preached in his sermon on the mount – happy/blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers. This was Isaiah's message: Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!" One can be happy, one can be strong in the midst of adversity, when one has eyes to see a different reality, a different future: waters breaking forth in the desert, haunts of jackals turned to wet lands, a highway where God's people walk and sing with joy!

This is our Advent work – to have our eyes opened, to envision new realities. But it's no small task. Some of us are visionary prophets like John the Baptist. We can become impatient, always seeing what could be better and frustrated that others move too slowly. If we're not careful we can become imprisoned, not in a physical jail like John, but captive to our frustrations to the point of becoming judgmental and bitter. As John sent his disciples to Jesus for advice, those with a prophetic vision need to seek the consensus of the community, to give thanks for the small things that are happening, the seeds that are germinating but haven't yet pushed through the soil and become visible.

Jesus told his disciples that no one had yet been born who was greater than John, yet the least in the kingdom is greater than he. We're all included in this "least." We all have a role in living and dreaming this vision. Some of us do it through working with community organizations. Some of us do it by believing that difficult family relationships will be healed. Some of us with less mobility do it primarily through prayer.

We are very fortunate in this congregation to have a mentor, a sage, some would call him a prophet, but certainly one who both dreams and acts. On Wednesday I attended a lunch of the Seward Civic and Commerce Association over at Northern Clay. Dick Westby was honored at that gathering for his many contributions to the Seward community. Communities don't just thrive on their own. Like children and like gardens, they need tender care, a watchful eye, someone who spends time, loves, hoes and rakes. Dick has done this during his 70+ years, first as a child growing up here on the very same lot where he lives today, later as a community educator at the Seward community center, and in retirement as a board member and community activist and volunteer.

I thought it was significant that as he shared a few comments, the lasting accomplishment that Dick emphasized above all others was the children's parade that the SCCA and others helped initiate back in the 60s. Business development, controlling crime, encouraging bike use and landscaping with native plants – they're important. But celebrating the presence of children

in the community, creating a venue for them to form an identity with the community, this is the work of building for the future. The parade continues to this day.

This evening we will bear the fruit of Dick's work. After our program and cookie social tonight, those who would like to go caroling will walk over to Seward Tower East, one of the high-rise apartment buildings in the neighborhood. The high-rises now have a predominantly Somali and therefore Muslim population, but Dick contacted a long-time high-rise resident and friend who was excited about the offer of our group to carol there. She has organized a party for building residents who celebrate Christmas. It will involve a potluck, some activities, and then caroling when our group arrives.

In some small way, I think our caroling over at Seward East may be one of the steps toward the embodiment of a growing desire, expressed to the Leadership Transition Committee this fall in its focus group discussions and surveys, for more focused outreach and involvement in the surrounding neighborhood and community. We who gather here on Sunday mornings have experienced new life and healing, fresh water for our thirsty souls in this place and among this community of faith. Let us believe that the highway that Isaiah envisioned extends from our door throughout the neighborhood to others who need an oasis of healing and hope.

Let us open our eyes and our arms to the "ransomed of the Lord [who] shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isaiah 35:10)

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