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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Advent 3

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”

That is the response, the rather cryptic response from John the Baptist when he is asked by the priests and Levites, “Who are you?”

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”

PAUSE

Now, imagine meeting someone for the first time say at a holiday party.

Imagine you have your glass of punch in hand, and you are mingling in the crowd at this party.

Imagine working the room, when suddenly you come up to someone you don't know.

You extend our hand in greeting and you say, “Hi, my name is Such-and-Such. And you are?”

To which, the other person responds, “Hi. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”

You would probably look at them a little strangely, and perhaps say, “Right. I am going to go get some more punch.”

At which point, you make your escape, and try to do all you can to avoid that person's presence again.

You might even say to our spouse or friend, “Did you meet that guy over there?”

“No, who is he?”

“Oh, let me tell you. That is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”

“Ah huh. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness?”

“That’s what he said.”

PAUSE

So, we get the picture, don’t we?

This is not your everyday, run-of-the-mill, introduction.

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”

Why not just say, “I am Rumpelstiltskin.”

Or, “I am the Incredible Hulk.”

Or, “I am the Eggman. I am the Walrus. Coo coo cachoo.”

PAUSE

But Friends, as strange as it may sound, John’s identification of himself is spot on.

He is The Voice.

Not the television show, mind you.

Not the John Legend and Kelly Clarkson, sit in your chairs and spin around, “The Voice.”

But, John the Baptist is the voice.

He is the one crying out in the wilderness.

John is the one who Isaiah had prophesied about in Isaiah 40:3.

John is the one who would proceed the coming of the Messiah.

He is the voice.

And so, by all accounts, that is the best definition of who John is.

That is the best explanation of what John is about...

That is best description of why John exists...

John is the messenger to the world.

He is the one called to announce the news: "The Messiah is coming. Make his path straight."

John is the voice.

PAUSE

My guess is that is how John truly saw himself, as a voice, as THE voice.

And my guess is that John is probably no different than the other prophets who had lived before him.

Those prophets like Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel...

Those prophets like Micah, and Nahum, and Hosea...

Those prophets like Amos, Obadiah, and Habakkuk...

All of the prophets probably saw themselves as the voice of the Almighty.

All of the prophets probably understood themselves as the mouthpiece of God.

Indeed, there are plenty of images in the Bible to lend credence to this thought.

God tells Ezekiel, for instance, to eat a scroll, which one assumes contained the Word of God.

And Ezekiel eats the scroll, and it was as sweet as honey to Ezekiel.

Ezekiel's mouth was filled then with God's word.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, experienced God reaching out with his hand and touching his mouth, such that God put in his mouth God's Word.

Isaiah, on the other hand, was approached by a fiery angel who touched his lips with a hot coal, so as to prepare his mouth to speak God's Word.

Yes, the prophets certainly understood themselves as persons elected by God to speak for God.

The prophets understood themselves as the voice.

PAUSE

Yes, there is something powerful going on here in our gospel lesson today.

But we may have missed it.

There is something profound going on in our gospel reading.

But we may have overlooked it.

There is something earth-shaking here.

But we may have failed to notice it.

To be sure, when God's word goes forth from the prophet, the Bible describes it as like a fire that consumes, and like a sledgehammer that pulverizes rock.

God's prophetic word has power.

It will accomplish what it is sent forth to do.

And yet, and yet, so often we stifle God's word.

So often we deaf to God's word.

So often we close our ears to hear God's word, or close our mouths to speak God's word, or close our hearts to experience God's word.

So often we hamper God's word to do what it needs to do in the world.

PAUSE

But, John the Baptist is telling us that lo and behold the Messiah is coming, and in fact he is already here.

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What do I mean by that?

I mean that you and I have a voice, too.

You and I by the power of the Jesus' Spirit, by the power of the Holy Spirit, at work in this tongue, and at work in these vocals chords, and at work in this larynx...

Yes, you and I by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are the voice in the world today.

If Christmas, by one definition, is about the incarnation.

If Christmas, by one definition, is about the Word made flesh.

Well then, the coming Messiah, the Word made flesh, is also evident in the Word made flesh in us.

We have a call, brothers and sisters in Christ, to use our voice, to speak God's Word, because when we don't the power of God is stifled.

PAUSE

Indeed, I was reminded of a poem as I wrote this sermon.

It is a poem by Primo Levi, who if we didn't know was of Italian descent, who was a chemist, and who was a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Primo Levi could also be described as the voice, one who is crying out in the wilderness.

Primo Levi wrote a poem that continues to haunt me.

The poem is called "On Trial."

It is about a man named Alex Zink, who is a textile manufacturer, who makes felt.

And who in this poem is on trial, not for war crimes, as we might think of war crimes, but who is on trial for crimes against humanity nonetheless.

The poem begins with the Judge asking the name of the defendant.

"My name? Alex Zink."

"Where were you born?"

Nuremberg, that illustrious ancient city. Rightly famous, honest judge."

"First, because of the ancient laws passed there that are of no interest here."

Zink is referring to the antisemitic and racist laws that were enacted in Nazi Germany in September 1935.

"Second, because of the debatable trial."

The Nuremberg trials.

"Third, because of the best toys in whole world are produced there."

Indeed, Nuremberg has been known for its toy manufacturing for over 600 years.

The judge continues...

“Tell me how you lived, and don’t lie, it would be useless here.”

“I was hardworking, Your Honor. Stone on top of stone, mark after mark.”

“I founded a model industry.” Not toy models, but model as in exemplary.

“I founded a model industry, the best buckram, the finest felt were made by the Zink Company.”

“I was a humane and diligent boss:”

“Honest prices, generous salaries, never a complaint from my customers.”

“And, as I was telling you, the best felt produced in Europe.”

“Did you use good wool?”

“Extraordinary wool, Your Honor, loose or in braids.”

“Wool of which I had the monopoly. Black wool and chestnut, tawny, and blonde; more often gray or white.”

“From what flocks? I don’t know. It didn’t interest me; I paid in cash.”

“Tell me, have your dreams been tranquil? Usually, yes, judge.”

“Though sometimes in my dreams, I’ve heard grieving ghosts groan.”

“Weaver, step down.”

PAUSE

Now, we may know that the Nazis used the hair of Jews to produce clothing, which is what this poem is getting at.

It is a haunting poem, especially the part where the judge asks, “From what flocks did you obtain your wool?”

And the weaver says, “I don’t know. It didn’t interest me. I paid in cash.”

And there we see what happens when God's word is stifled by our deaf ears, "I don't want to know," by our mute lips, "I don't want to tell," and our closed hearts, "I don't care."

Primo Levi sought to change that. He sought to be a voice, by his poetry and other writings.

Just like Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to be a voice.

Just like Elizabeth Cady Stanton sought to be a voice.

Just like Malala Yousafzai seeks to be a voice.

Just like Greta Thunberg seeks to be a voice.

And there are many, many more who make the concerted effort to be a voice for God's word in this world.

There are many voices crying out in the wilderness.

PAUSE

Yes, Advent is about a voice. The coming of the Lord is about a voice.

The voice of John the Baptist, the voice of the angel announcing to Mary that she will have a child, the voice of Mary saying, "Let it be, as you say."

Advent is about a voice, it is also about our voice.

There is a wilderness out there that so desperately needs to hear truth and justice, mercy and compassion, hope and healing, love and tenderness.

And God is always speaking to us, and soon he will speak again his Word Jesus into the world. But even so, right now, in your very life, God is speaking his Word into the world right now through you and through me.

Thanks be God. Amen.