

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Rev. Stephen Crippen

The Second Sunday in Advent, December 4, 2011

Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

God Follows the Path Marked Out by Justice

If you know him already, I don't need to tell you that there are many benefits to being the spouse of Andrew Stone. He is thoughtful, observant, friendly, supportive, consistent...in all that he does, all of his projects, he is *thorough*. He is a good cook. And he has worked these past twenty years for one of the Pacific Northwest's best corporate citizens—Nordstrom. And *that* means that being Andrew's spouse brings yet one more great benefit: a *Nordstrom discount*.

Unlike most of you I have savored a Nordstrom discount for more than a decade now, indulging in Italian Mephisto shoes and smart-care 'boat' shirts and everything in between. And maybe that's one reason why, despite the fact that I'm a deacon—and deacons are supposed to be prophetic figures, and even humble!—I just can't get next to that ill-clad, messy prophet, John the Baptizer.

I find him a little annoying. Dressed in camel's hair (an echo of Elijah, another prophet who wore a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist), eating locusts and wild honey—that's a lot like a current fad of our own time called the "paleo" diet, that is, a diet from the time before agriculture—John the Baptizer breaks into civilized society with an urgent message, an exhortation to turn, to turn around, to turn toward a new way of living.

Have you met people who remind you of John the Baptizer? I think you have. Like him, they emerge from some form of "wilderness"—they come at you from an unexpected place. They materialize in front of you outside the grocery store with a clipboard, calling, "Do you have a minute for gay rights?" And you feel like if you don't stop, well, it's going to look like you *don't* have a minute for gay rights. They are the activists who show you videos of animal cruelty and demand that you hear the silent voices of innocent animals. (A few of these stand outside my

beloved Nordstrom, reminding shoppers that fur kills.) They are the homeless citizens of Seattle who show up at town meetings and tell Mayor McGinn that he needs to see that many of our homeless neighbors are not "bums" or criminals, but they're actually working hard to do their part to improve our city. They are the Occupy demonstrators who demand that we listen—and respond—to the call for equity and basic fairness in our economic and political systems.

These 'John the Baptizers' are *meant* to be annoying. They don't seem to fit in at the Nordstrom flagship store.

But is that so? Is the voice of justice always and only heard on the edge, from the wilderness, away from our comfortable homes and workplaces, outside of our plush department stores?

I don't think so. I don't want to give these vocal prophets of our own time the sole credit for being the voice of justice. Recall what I said a bit ago about Andrew, a 20-year employee of Nordstrom who, like most of us in this room, is an ordinary hard-working person who wants to contribute to the greater good in his daily life at work, at home, and at church. (Incidentally, Andrew's employer, a family-run business that laid off zero I.T. employees during the Great Recession, seems to want justice too.) You may not find many of us walking back and forth in protest at Westlake Center or Seattle Central Community College, and yet I don't doubt that a great many of us not only find a lot to like in the message and purpose of the Occupy movement, our lives actually bend our corner of the world toward that same justice Occupy is seeking. Few of us may choose to stand outside a grocery store with a clipboard soliciting donations for animal-rights groups, and yet I have many friends who think twice before eating meat, seek out ethical restaurants and food merchants, worry about where

food waste goes, and think nothing of spending more for sustainably-raised food. In even the most conventional, ho-hum daily life of an ordinary person, John the Baptizer seems to find a way in.

But...why? Why is it that throughout the history of the church we have suffered the annoying cries of desert prophets? Why is that we must listen to them? Why do they get under our skin? It can be easy to fall into the habit of seeing all this as a dreary collection of what therapists like to call “Should” statements: you *should* be ethical when you’re heating your home or cooking food; you *should* create a fair and progressive tax system; you *should* regulate banks and polluters and school districts. Why? Well, *because I said so*.

But that’s not good enough. And it’s not the whole story that we’re hearing in today’s readings or in the season of Advent, or in the whole cycle of feasts and fasts that make up our church year, our life together as followers of Jesus. We need to move beyond simple, moralistic “should” statements.

Here’s how.

When we hear John the Baptizer’s call to “repent,” or to be more accurate, “to turn around,” we are hearing God graciously calling us to make room in our lives for the *loveliness* of God’s intended life for all creatures on earth, and for the earth herself. Listen again to today’s first reading: God speaks comfort to God’s people. God “speaks tenderly,” and reassures the flock—lost in the wilderness of exile, the wilderness of injustice—that if they prepare a royal highway of justice, then God will be among them, God will “feed them like a shepherd.” When they build a pathway of justice, God will lead the way down that royal road with an abundance of mercy.

And in the second letter of Peter, written to an early group of Jesus-followers who were wondering why the *parousia*—the coming of Christ—hadn’t happened yet, the author reassures them that this delay is simply God’s graceful indulgence of time for them to prepare for Christ’s return—to prepare once again by *turning around*, turning their lives around so that their community is bent toward justice.

And *then* we hear John the Baptizer, patron of annoying people, calling to us in the opening passages of Mark’s Gospel. We hear from him that this turning—this turning from the old ways—is the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ...” We listen to his (sometimes annoying) call because that

call is bidding us to turn toward a lovelier life, a more vivid and splendid community, a delightfully life-giving way of inhabiting this good—and imperiled—world. When we live in justice, the greatest and least among us live well.

Justice is ... *lovely*.

You may have already seen my little commercial in the *Sundays and Beyond* leaflet this week. I’m hoping to develop small groups in January, groups of six to eight people to do the work of discernment, asking themselves the question, where is God calling me right now? How can my little life, my little contribution, be a part of the building of a royal highway of justice? Some of us do great things. Some of us stand out in the rain—or even wind up in prison—fighting for the rights of those who can’t speak for themselves. Some of us literally raise the roof of justice, assisting the working poor in the construction of their own homes. And others of us find quieter—*yet no less important*—ways to bend the world toward justice. Saying the brave thing when you see harassment in the workplace. Making your home the greenest on the block. Greeting that stranger next to you. Embracing Advent as a time to hold the whole world on your heart in a plea of urgent prayer, prayer that inevitably supports all of us in our action.

We sang the last verse of today’s psalm this way: “Righteousness shall go before [God], and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.” Another (more accurate) translation has *justice* going before God, and God “[setting] his footsteps on the way.” The translator, Robert Alter, says that “God, preparing to walk about the earth after having withdrawn from it in his wrath, follows the path marked out by justice.”

God follows the path marked out by justice.

How, in ways large and small, in your own little life, are you marking out this path? For here is the Good News: on this royal highway of justice, built by you and me and all people of good conscience, on this path of justice, and no other, we will meet God in great joy, with hands held out.

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Works cited or consulted:
Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*
Gerard S. Sloyan, *Preaching from the Lectionary: An Exegetical Commentary*