

What if We are the Messengers?

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church
Sunday, December 12, 2004; Bryn Mawr, PA*

3rd Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2-11

“This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’”

We’re on a journey; we’re looking for something. Isn’t that what sends us into religion at one time or another; a searching, and yearning for something? We have pulled ourselves out of the hustle and bustle of the world; we have removed ourselves from the heavy expectations and demands of life, and have found ourselves here. Why? Maybe others brought us here. Maybe we heard about Christianity like we hear about any fad, any South Beach Diet, spiritual retreat possibility, or NASDAQ market trend. Maybe we have heard that some kind of promise, some kind of hope can be found in this place, the ideals of Christianity, and we want in. So we pack our bags, take the necessary leave of absence, (for at least Sunday mornings) and begin to look for this hope of life called Christianity.

The crowd of people from Jerusalem and all Judea were also looking for something; they were also on a journey. They had heard about John the Baptist’s call to repentance, they had heard about Jesus’ works and deeds, and they wanted to know more. Maybe they even wanted to join in this new movement, this new trend. They had seen people praising God for amazing things, they had seen a man cleansed of the demons, they have heard about the blind man given sight, they talked to someone else who saw Jesus allow the deaf to hear, and they wanted to see and know what this Jesus was about. They saw the poor dancing and praising God with a sense of assurance and confidence that only someone of wealth could afford; and the poor still danced. They wanted to see and know what this Jesus was about. The witnesses have enticed them, caught their interest, and the people were ready to journey into the wilderness to see and hear what this Jesus was about.

We have our witness as well; the ones who have lived in a way different from the grain of the world, but as the theologian John Howard Yoder (and Stanley Hauerwas) claim they have lived in a way that is in line with the grain of the universe. We have witnessed the lives of Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bishop Romero, and Billy Graham. We have witnessed the Christian lives of individuals who had nothing and still praised God – and we are interested. We have seen people in this church give without expecting anything in return, and our interest is peaked. I just read a eulogy about a man named Red Davis, who was the CEO of a major Texas Company, but when he retired he volunteered to teach Sunday school to the 3 and 4 year olds (Gordon Atkinson, “Following Red,” Christian Century, December 14, 2004). Such a witness catches our attention, and we leave the world to learn more, even if it is only for one hour on a Sunday, or if it is for our whole life, and we journey into the wilderness, the very same wilderness from whence these witnesses came. This wilderness is the darkness of our souls, the darkness of the world. From refugee camps, to city slums, to our own sins we enter into the wilderness to find this Jesus that we hear so much about. We enter into the place where God speaks and demons attack, and we look and seek the messenger, we look and seek John the Baptist who is

proclaiming repentance, new life, and new hope because we want some as well. We are on a journey, looking for something in the wilderness.

While we journey, we see on one side reeds and grass, blowing and bending in the wind, and on the other side, richly adorned figures carrying pomp and pious attitudes. It is like we are the seeds being scattered on the path, but we can choose where to fall. On the one side, the reeds blowing are the “yes-men” the accommodating ones, the Christians of convenience. It is religion of the times, religion as the wind blows. This is Richard Neibuhr’s Christ in Culture; it is an understanding of Christianity that becomes so immersed in the culture that it loses its own identity. Yes, relevancy is important, but we are not looking for the world in the church. Instead we are looking for a way the church can be the witness to the world. We are not looking to change the church for the world but to see how the church can change the world. Bonhoeffer once said, that the churches of the Third Reich were trying to make the Gospel fit the culture, when we should be working to bring the culture up to the level of the Gospel. Yet many churches swoon and sway to every cultural trend, every music trend, and every political and philosophical trend and lose any sense of Christian identity. Such swaying and swooning goes back to Constantine declaring Christianity to be a state church in the 5th century. At that point (and probably before), the church became a “yes-church” relenting, negotiating and accommodating the culture and society for the sake of acceptability. We see these reeds blowing to one side or another, and know that is not the way we are to go. There is no healing, no redemption, or no reconciliation with the oppressed and the oppressors. Let’s not walk that path; let’s not let our seeds fall in that way.

We look to the other side and find riches, fine robes, and beautiful fabrics. But again, there is something that doesn’t seem right, for the gilded cross is not the cross of salvation. Remember that the search for wealth and fine adornments was partially the cause for much corruption of the Catholic Church in the 1400s. Those with fine robes belong in palaces, we are told, and they belong in places of worldly power. Those with money claiming to have truth are deceptive and manipulative. Those with long tassels are only looking for their own glory, and have no good news for the poor. They have no room for the poor. We are looking for the Christ, whom we know through word and deed, and in these palaces, in these finely adorned homes we do not find the blind receiving their sight, we do not see the lame walking, there is no good news for the poor, and we wonder if we can find life as well.

So we should put on our blinders, leave the convenience of a cultural religion, leave the finery of the gilded religion, and let us continue into the wilderness looking and seeking the Christ, which offers so much hope and life.

It is when we decide to turn from the easy path, the “sure” path and keep walking in the wilderness that we will encounter Christ.

When we get to that point in the wilderness when despair is great, and it is truly overcome by hope – that is where we see Christ. When I was working in an AIDS drop-in shelter in Boston, I was in the wilderness and I saw Christ. For I saw people lost, alienated, rejected, and hurting who had given up. At the center they found shelter, they found support, they found love, and they found healing – the blind was given sight, the lame walked, and the sick were cleansed. This is truly good news for the poor of our society.

Are you with me, in the wilderness of the world? Do you see in Jesus the hope that is proclaimed? In the wilderness of your own life, away from the pomp and the convenience of the world and in your own hurting self – can you experience Jesus speaking to you, touching you, healing you, and giving you good news? This is a difficult part of Christianity, you have to go into the wilderness to see Jesus and feel Jesus' touch. You can't say everything is fine, and then ask Jesus to make everything even more fine. No, we all need to be healed, and when we realize that, and accept that, then we will be healed of our own broken selves. You have to believe the words and the deeds that proceed him, you have to believe that you need him, and you will find yourself in the wilderness – and Jesus is there, waiting for you. So again I urge you, go into the wilderness of the world, go into the wilderness of your own life, and stay there waiting for Jesus.

And when you see Jesus, when you touch him, experience his grace, and know that you are forgiven. Know that you are made whole. Know that you are loved and completed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then, allow yourself to step back and look again at your savior and messiah. Look back and ask who was it that brought you here? Who was the messenger who proclaimed the good news?

You look and you see the church! You look and you see us!

The church! Ragged, broken, healed, and whole is the messenger; the ones proclaiming the good news are... we. As we respond to the call, we call others as well to experience the grace of Jesus. We are to stand on the wall and cry to the world to come into the church, just as we have, broken and in need of love. Come and be a part of a people who are all in the wilderness in one way or another, and experience the grace of Christ. But as soon as they enter into the church, point away from the church to Christ. We invite them in so that we can send them out to Jesus Christ. For we don't want people to be followers of us, of a specific church, but of Jesus Christ. But this is no easy task, it means that we must constantly detract attention from ourselves, and unlike the Wizard of Oz ask people to pay attention to the man behind the curtain – gathering us, controlling us, and loving us.

In this time of waiting, in this time of Advent, our task as herald is most pressing and most difficult. How often do we hear during this season about the “real message of Christmas?” and yet it still is someone just skirting the idea of Jesus, and keeping the gospel message saccharine? Can we shout out loud enough to overcome the din of the holiday rush? Can we hold to our convictions to remind the world that from the wood of the manger comes the wood of the Cross? What is the message of Christmas but that we call people to the wilderness of their lives, and offer them a baby for hope and peace? There is a Simpson's episode where all of the immigrants were evicted from the land of America. In preparation for this mass exodus, Chief Wigam said to his troops, “Okay, boys, lets start with your tired, then your poor, then you're mass huddled...”

Well, as the church we are to claim, give us your tired, your poor, and your mass huddled for we want to meet them in the wilderness and bring them to Christ. This means that we have to stay in the suffering; this means that we have to stay in the messy, and this means that they will become the church. The temptation to be a Church of the reeds or a church of the rich is strong during the Advent season, so we must keep to the call and the grace of Christ.

What is it that attracts the crowd, what is it that convinces John the Baptist that Jesus is “The

One Who Is To Come,” but the words and deeds about Christ. As we are healed, our story of healing and redemption is part of the proclamation of the church. As we are brought out of despair and into hope, our story of grace and forgiveness will be part of the proclamation of the church. But the story is not about the church but about Christ. The great theologian, Karl Barth claimed that the Church proclaims the word as John the Baptist did, immediately pointing away from himself and towards the holy Lamb of God. And as we turn away from ourselves and to those in need, pointing them to Christ, the church will grow in hope, in peace and in the grace of Christ. We will doubt from time to time, we will fail from time to time, but we are the ones to proclaim the good news. We are the messengers in the wilderness calling people to Christ.

In the proclamation, the church will become more than any prophet, and at the same time will be the least in the kingdom of God. For in proclaiming we are that which we proclaim. We cry the Kingdom of God is upon us with the birth of the babe, and in crying with one voice we come to experience the Kingdom of God. We cry that the blind, the lame, the deaf, the sick, and the poor shall have hope with the birth of the babe, and in crying with one voice we experience and become that hope. Yet all that we can be is still not all that Christ is, and it is only a glimpse. And this gives us cause for rejoicing.

So let us stand on the wall of the market, let us stand on the wall of the world, and proclaim that the time is near, the babe and the king will shortly be here, and the Kingdom of God will be upon us. Oh the way is prepared, the blind shall receive their sight, the lame shall walk, the lepers will be cleansed, the deaf shall hear, the dead shall be raised, the poor will have good news, and we will be blessed in hearing and receiving this very good news.

AMEN