

December 7, 2003  
Second Sunday of Advent  
David L. Edwards

### A Desert Wind Rises

Luke 3:1-6    *...the word of God came to  
John son of Zechariah  
in the wilderness.  
He went into all the region around the Jordan,  
proclaiming a baptism of repentance  
for the forgiveness of sins...*

Luke is about to tell the story of Jesus' baptism, the launching of his ministry. First he introduces us to John the Baptist, calling people to prepare their lives for God's reign. Is this a strange story to hear just when we're getting ourselves set to celebrate Jesus' birth? Not really. It is a reminder that we are not celebrating Jesus' birth as though it were happening again. Jesus has already been born. His life and ministry have already taken place. The time for us is now, to look at our lives today in light of Christ's call to a completely new life.

For many centuries, Advent was a time of self-examination and penitence for the Christian community. Only in recent times has Advent been tamed and conquered by our culture. What we have now is a nice, cozy warm-up for Christmas, instead of the white-hot call to conversion on the lips of John the Baptist. What we end up with is a sentimental journey to Bethlehem to see a cute little baby instead of the call to renovate our lives so that Jesus can come and give us a whole new orientation, rooted in the kingdom of God. This is why the lectionary for Advent has always included the story of John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness, calling for repentance, for people to prepare their lives for the reign of God. John's crying out pierces through the fog. It is a clarion call for the reordering of life, beginning with our own lives.

Luke begins by listing the political and religious leaders of the world as he knew it. Emperor Tiberius, the second Roman Emperor, the political head of the whole known world of that time. Pontius Pilate, installed by Rome to keep Judea under control. Herod, the king over Galilee, his brother Philip and three of Herod's sons, all of whom together kept control over Israel. Then there is the religious leadership of the day, the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas, blending religious and political power. Luke shows us all the power structures of the day, political and religious.

Why is Luke telling us all this? Is he just giving us a history lesson, setting John's ministry and Jesus' baptism in time and space? Luke is doing something else. He's making a statement, sending a message. All these powerful religious and political people and structures--surely that's where the action is. That's where things are really going to happen. Power is what it's all about. But then Luke writes, as though after a significant pause, "the word of God came to..." Tiberius Caesar? Pontius Pilate? Herod and his family of rulers? The high priests? No. The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah. A nobody. A ragged, crazed ascetic with no power in the world of religion or politics. No campaign funds. No corporate backing. No vote in parliament or congress. No money. No prestige. No connections. The living word of God comes to this guy. And where is John? In the temple? In the houses of political power? In the corporate

offices? No. He's out in the wilderness, the desert. The place where human beings have nothing to lean on, nothing to hide behind, where they are face to face with their own bare humanity and with God. The desert, into which God led the people of Israel to teach them how to live by faith. The desert, where Jesus would struggle with temptations to abandon complete trust in God. The desert is a very special place. A place of abandonment. A place of refuge. A place of deep solitude. A place where we experience a kind of death and yet a kind of new life.

A new wind of God is rising up in the desert. Not in the royal palaces of Caesar and the splendor and might of Rome...or Washington, or London, or any other center of political and military power. Not in the halls of parliaments or congresses or state houses or corporate headquarters, where deals are struck to give the powerful more power, the wealthy more wealth. Not in the places where religion has made its peace with the world of power and wealth. Not where the church seeks its own survival and the *status quo*, its originating vision and mission grown cold and forgotten.

The stirring of God's living Word rises up in the wilderness. The wilderness is that place, geographically or spiritually, where we are alone with God, where our whole lives come under the claim of God. It is the place that cuts the ties of our addictions to the culture we live in. In the desert it is revealed to us that our lives have not been centered in Christ, in God alone. In the desert we see how lost we have become, how we have drifted into living by bread alone, hiding our light under a bushel basket, being filled with anxiousness for every tomorrow. In the desert we see how far we have drifted away from Christ and our discipleship to him.

Yet, in the desert comes not just revelation of our exile, our disorientation, the ways we have bought into the culture around us. In the desert there is also a turning around, a fresh beginning, the sounding of a clear call that tells us to whom we truly belong. John's message, as he comes out of the desert, the new wind at his back, is one of deep joy, a message of repentance, turning around, changing our minds, being transformed. We can make room in our lives for God's reign. We can clear the way for God's coming to live in us and with us in Christ. And John calls us to it.

In "Our Covenant One with Another," the statement of membership in our church, our purpose is expressed as that of making God's will dominant in our own lives and helping others to do so, as well. It is a desert kind of statement. It affirms that the response to Christ's call to discipleship means a fundamental reorientation of our lives. God's love and will, as revealed to us in Christ, are chosen as the center of our lives. Here is the recognition that fullness of life is found only as we seek daily to be centers of God's transforming wind, of God's disturbing and healing Word.

Advent is a season for us to go out into the desert. Away from the mesmerizing allure of power and the powerful, away from every voice and claim that is not ultimate, that is not of God. It is to those who enter the desert, the wilderness, to whom God speaks that new word, the word of hope, of life, of transformation. Another word for desert or wilderness is solitude. Solitude is our capacity to be alone with God, to know ourselves in relation to God and to see our whole life in that relationship. Jesus found this solitude in the desert, the lonely places of prayer and silence. Henri Nouwen writes in his little book Out of Solitude these words: "In the lonely place [we can say "desert"] Jesus finds the courage to follow God's will and not his own; to speak God's words and not his own; to do God's work and not his own." [p. 14] As we follow Christ, as we also enter into that solitude, that desert, we find the courage to discern and follow God's will, not our own, to hear and speak God's words and not our own, to perceive and do God's

work and not our own. We come out of the desert as different people, free people, able to live and to speak the truth we know in Christ.

The message of the Gospel could be put this way: the world is going to be changed by God through those who are themselves changed people, who live out of a different center than the dominant culture. When we are being transformed by God, we live in such a way, speak in such a way, that we challenge the systems and structures that perpetuate suffering, that support the destruction of people and the creation, that call war peace and greed compassion. During this Advent, we as Christ's community are called into that desert where the wind of God's new life is rising. As we open the doors and windows of our hearts and minds, we let that wind enter us, fill us, displacing everything that has captured and ensnared us, leaving us feeling alienated from ourselves, from others, from God. We are given a new word, a word of true hope and peace that seeks to be incarnated in us so that we become that living word.

Last week I had the opportunity to meet Emily Warn, a poet who is Writer-in-Residence at Lynchburg College. Last spring she was invited by Mrs. Laura Bush to participate in what was planned as a pleasant symposium on American poetry. This happened at the time of the launching of our war on Iraq. Emily Warn invited fellow poets to submit poems or statements of conscience against the impending war. In a very short time, more than 11,000 poets spoke out on the Poets Against the War website. Mrs. Bush canceled the event "because she believes poetry and politics should be kept separate." [*The English Newsletter*, Lynchburg College, Fall 2002 and Spring 2003] In her response to the cancellation, Warn wrote to Mrs. Bush that "poetry holds a mirror to the reality that our political systems and values create and in doing so reveals their limitations and other possibilities open to us. In its refracted light we see our intangible connections, the irrefutable unity of all people and beings on the planet." Poets know the importance of being in the desert in order to hear a different voice, the voice of truth that liberates us from superficiality and propaganda. John had the soul of a poet. Poets have the souls of prophets.

When we are willing to be in the desert, we hear the word of truth, of new life, that comes from God. That word comes to those who want God's will and love to be dominant in their lives, for their own healing and the healing of the world. Hearing that word, we can become that new and life-giving word in the world. A new wind is rising. Out in the desert. Let us go there, to feel it on our faces, in our hearts, and in our minds.

Let us pray:

O God, help us to be unafraid to enter the desert, that solitude where you reveal to us our illusions and where you speak to us your word of life. Amen.