

December 6, 2009/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 beginning of his ministry. He introduces us to John the Baptist, who is calling people to prepare their lives for God's reign. This may seem a strange story to hear when we are getting ready to celebrate Jesus' birth. However, it reminds us 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 Jesus' call to a new way of life. It is a wake-up call for us as Jesus' community in today's world.

For centuries, Advent was a time for waking up spiritually. It was a season of self-examination and penitence for the Christian community, a time to re-awaken to the life of faith. Then Advent was conquered by our culture, and lost its significance even in the church itself. It became a cozy warm-up for a sentimentalized Christmas, instead of the white-hot call to conversion on the lips of John the Baptist. Advent and Christmas is not a sentimental journey to Bethlehem to see a cute little baby. It is a call to renovate our lives in a new direction, what John and Jesus called the kingdom of God. This is why the Advent lectionary has always included the story of John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness, calling 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. The Roman Emperor Tiberius, political and military ruler of the 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 keeping control over Israel. The religious leadership of the day, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, combining religious and political power. Luke shows us all the power structures of the day, political and religious.

Why is Luke telling us all this? He is making a bold statement. Surely if God is going to do something, it has to be through those powerful people and systems. 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, hippie-type character with no standing in the world of religion or politics. No campaign funds. No corporate backing. No prestige. No connections. No mega-church. No television show. Not even a website. And God is going to speak through this guy?!

And where is John? In the temple? In the halls of political power? In the corporate offices? In a high-tech auditorium with slick religious productions? 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 so that they might learn what it means to live by faith. The desert, where Jesus would struggle with temptations to abandon complete trust in and intimacy with God in favor of political and religious "success". 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 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 nationalism and violence and greed. Not where the church seeks to extend its own advantage and gain power over others.

The new winds of God rise 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 where our addictions to the culture we live in are severed, where we are liberated from the dominating illusions. In the desert it is revealed to us that our lives have not been centered 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, filled with anxiousness for every tomorrow. In the desert we see how far we have drifted from life as discipleship to Jesus.

Yet, in the desert comes not only the revelation of our exile, our disorientation. 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, changing our minds, coming home to our true selves, the persons God made us to be. We make room in our lives for God's reign. We begin to clear the way for God's coming to live in us and with us in Jesus and the life he taught and embodied.

In "Our Covenant One with Another," the statement of Covenant Membership in our community, 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 Jesus' call to discipleship means a fundamental reorientation of our lives. God's love and will, as revealed to us in Jesus, 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 that God speaks the new 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. As we follow Jesus, as we also enter into that solitude, that desert, we begin to discern and follow God's will, to hear and speak God's words, to perceive and do the work to which we feel God calling us. 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, healed, made more just and compassionate by God through those who live out of a different center than the dominant culture, whose lives are rooted in the desert, the wilderness. 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 Jesus' community are called into that desert where the wind of God's new life is rising. How do we do it? Simply by practicing with greater care and attention the things to which we have committed ourselves. Daily times of silence, prayer, reflection, inner listening, study. Anchoring our lives in the inward journey that keeps us from being swept along by the currents of the cultural captivity of Christmas. This is practicing solitude, the desert, where we touch our lives in God.

Six years ago I had the opportunity to meet Emily Warn, a poet who was Writer-in-Residence at Lynchburg College. In the spring of 2003, she was invited by then First Lady Laura Bush to participate in what was planned as a pleasant symposium on American poetry. This coincided with the launching of our invasion of 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, predictably, canceled the event "because she believe[d] 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. And I think that every one of us is created with the inner capacity to hear that same Voice, to feel that same wind of God rising up in the desert to bring new life, new direction, new hope.

This season is very pleasant and for many brings warm and beautiful sentiments. However, it brings something far deeper and more life-giving. It brings the opportunity to hear a different Voice, to go out into the desert where we are with God alone. It brings the possibilities of a fresh new beginning and a new orientation, to our own lives and the life of the world.