

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Patrick C. Ward

Sunday, December 8, 2019

Matthew 3:1-12

“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

In the name of the one who is to come.

AMEN

California Highway 92 is a beautiful stretch of road.

It begins at the Pacific Coast Highway in Half Moon Bay,

south of San Francisco,

and winds its way up into the mountains known as the Coastal Range

before dipping back down just north of the Silicon Valley.

It's a narrow, mainly undivided two- and three-lane highway

with frequent switchback turns.

If you are driving west in the daytime,

you can see for miles: deep forested valleys falling away on your right

and glimpses on the horizon of the blue Pacific.

If your windows are down, sometimes you can smell eucalyptus trees.

[PAUSE]

Just now, however, you are navigating 92 East at night,

All by yourself.

You've been at the beach near Santa Cruz all day,

enjoyed dinner

and maybe a bit too much California Chardonnay with good friends.

As you drive you find yourself enveloped in heavy coastal fog.

Dust and grit from the roads is caked on the windshield,

and as you drive along the undivided switchback twists and turns

of Highway 92, you can't clear it.

Your wiper fluid had run out.

The wiper blades you've been intending to replace are worn and useless.

The high beams of each oncoming car on that dark narrow road

turned the windshield into a hot, white, opaque wall of light.

You are now as frightened as you've ever been behind the wheel of a car.

92 in those mountains has very few off ramps.

No exits or service stations, it seems, for miles.

You are not really a pray-er at this point in your life.

But you are mumbling over and over again.

Please God Please God Please God Please God.

I don't want to die here.

[PAUSE]

At one point at a level place you find an off ramp
and are able to take yourself off of Highway 92.

Your intention is to pull over
and to wipe off the windshield with your beach towel.

You find yourself though
in a small development of low-slung, contemporary homes.

You see light coming out of the windows of one of them.

So you decide to ask for help.

Maybe you can borrow some wiper fluid, or at least hose off the car.

You pull into the gravel driveway of a house with the lights on.

You ring the bell.

Immediately you hear the deep wolfish howl of a dog,
and a man's voice answering back.

"Ivan, shut the hell up!"

You hear Ivan's claws slipping and scratching on a wooden floor.

The door swings open.

A small-framed man with gray hair and big plastic-rimmed eyeglasses,
about 70 years old, stands there.

He is holding back an immense growling German shepherd by the collar.

“Ivan, I swear to God,” he says.

Then he looks at you and says “Hi...what are...who are you?”

You explain about the windshield, the wipers.

You ask him for help.

He looks at you with some exasperation.

You can't see anyone else in the house.

It seems to be just him and the dog.

“Give me a second,” he said, and slams the door in your face.

The dog continues to growl inside.

A minute later the man emerges from around the side of the house,

pulling a long garden hose with angry, short, violent jerks.

Without even looking at you he begins to hose off your car.

“If you own a car,” he tells you, keeping his eyes on his work,

“You have to maintain it.

That includes checking all the fluids.

Driving a car is the most dangerous thing a person does every day.

You could have been killed.

You could have killed someone else.”

[PAUSE]

You are startled by his anger into a kind of simper.

You are still young enough to be shocked when one of your requests for help is met with anything less than delight and cheerfulness.

You have been raised to place a high premium on “nice.”

You’d been having an awful time on Highway 92.

You are not in the mood to be lectured.

But he is right.

“Drive carefully,” he commands, sternly.

“At the bottom of the hill, take a right. There’s a Shell station.”

“I could have been killed,” you say, repeating his own words.

This seems to set him off.

“No, you could have killed yourself.

And quite possibly someone else who had bothered to maintain *his* car.”

He doesn’t say goodbye or goodnight or good luck.

He just disappears back around the corner of the house,
pulling the hose behind him in with angry short, violent jerks.

He has helped you out.

Probably saved your life.

But he has left you feeling sheepish and jittery and defensive.

[PAUSE]

Minutes later, at the Shell station,

you dutifully buy wiper fluid and top off your tank.

As you stand at the pump a car pulls up next to you.

It's a young family.

Quite possibly they have just come down from 92 themselves.

The father gets out to gas up

and the mother is consulting a navigation app on her phone.

Two children, possibly four and six, are strapped into the back seat.

One is asleep and the other is playing with a kind of cup, ball and string toy.

Not one of them notices you, a stranger, at the next pump.

Not one of them is aware that in this moment

you are overcome by a mystical and unexpected sense of care for them,

people you do not know.

You are not really a pray-er at this point in your life.

But you are suddenly praying again, for the second time that evening.

A prayer of thanks that here we all are, at these pumps, intact.

Breathing.

Alive.

[PAUSE]

Here we all are.

[PAUSE]

*“Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets
to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation;
give us grace to heed their warnings...”*

Those are the words of our opening collect this morning.

All about these messengers, the prophets.

Especially today, John.

Biblical prophets aren't primarily fortune tellers or oracles.

They serve instead to hold up a vision of God's kingdom to us,
and to point out, in no uncertain terms,

how far we are falling short of that Kingdom.

Their words scald and scorch.

They strike the earth with the rods of their mouths.

Like the man with the hose,

they tend not to care much about our egos and our self-esteem.

They are never nice.

They are often angry

[PAUSE]

And they save us.

[PAUSE]

“You brood of vipers.”

Those are the words that scald in this morning’s lesson from Matthew.

John, in crude camel’s hair and a rough leather belt,

is indicting the privileged, the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Children of snakes, he says.

And because these are people who know their scripture,

the link to the serpent in the Garden is clear and unquestioned

by all within the sound of John’s voice.

Your inner landscapes, the landscape of the world,

says John, needs to be turned over, needs to be reversed.

You need to change your ways.

We know from Mark’s gospel

that John was well-versed in Hebrew scripture.

That if he knew about the snake in the garden, he probably knew too

about these Advent words from Isaiah:

“the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.”

So snake doesn’t always have to be a snake in the Kingdom of God.

John, like Isaiah, like Jeremiah, like Amos,
is a hoser-downer.

He strikes the world with the rod of his mouth
not in hatred, not in spite,
but in hope.

He believes in change, our change.

Our transformation.

In the possibility of repentance.

Luke's telling of this same story makes this clear.

Luke's John is angry because he sees so much possibility ahead of us.

Luke's John is angry because he is taking us with utter seriousness
as agents of our own and of the world's transformation.

In Luke's gospel,

John addresses the whole crowd on the banks of the Jordan,
and not simply the Pharisees and Sadducees.

He even dispenses career-specific advice.

"Teacher, what should we do?" ask the tax collectors.

"Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

"Teacher, what should we do?" ask the soldiers.

"Do not extort money by threats."

I wonder if any of these people were used to being taken so seriously.

Are we *ourselves* used to being taken this seriously?

Are we used to being told that we may be on the wrong road,
without wiper fluid?

In a society that places a premium on self-esteem,
that places a premium on good manners,
how comfortable are we with an unvarnished call to change our ways?

Here's the thing about John.

He scalds and he scolds,
but always understands those on Jordan's bank as capable of repentance.

His is disarmingly wise.

He exposes us with his honesty.

And he shows up every year on Advent Two
to call us out of our comfort zones and into something called new life.

[PAUSE]

*Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist
and his food was locusts and wild honey.*

He must have been terrifically charismatic, this John.

Mark's gospel tell is that even Herod, of whom John was harshly critical,

liked to listen to the Baptist.

Understood John to be a holy and righteous man.

Now Herod will eventually be manipulated into ordering John's beheading.

But that Herod is recorded as **liking** John, as **drawn** to him,

Perhaps offers us some ancient Advent insight

into our own particular and highly polarized American moment.

John has a deep and angry argument with Herod.

John is mad.

And yet, we are told, Herod listens.

"I get it—you're mad," said Jonathan Turley this week.

Turley is a George Washington University law professor,

one of the scholars called on Wednesday

before the House Judiciary Committee.

"The President's mad," he told the representatives

"My Republican friends are mad.

My Democratic friends are mad.

My wife is mad.

My kids are mad.

Even my dog seems mad, and Luna's a goldendoodle,

and they don't get mad.

So we're all mad," concludes Turley.

"Where has that taken us?"

[PAUSE]

Where **does** anger take us?

Where does anger take us?

That's always a question worth asking.

Especially if, in the heat of the moment, we can muster the mindfulness.

John, like some irritable man with a garden hose and a growling dog,
is angry.

And he seeks only the welfare of those within his view.

There is righteous **anger** to him, but this is not to be understood as **hatred**.

John is harsh **and** he seeks only the welfare of those he's harshing on.

His anger does **not** become violent.

His anger does **not** create victims.

In fact, in an eventual and hideous reckoning,

John himself will be the victim.

John's anger, instead, seeks to make the world new.

John's anger, instead, reminds us that **we** can be made new.

[PAUSE]

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.