

Title: Holding Forth Our Blessed Hope

Subtitle: The prophets' message prepares us for our Lord's coming.

Many Episcopalians have mixed feelings about Advent because it seems out of sync with the usual expectations that accompany this season of the year. The old Christmas song made famous by Andy Williams expresses what many of us feel, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year?”¹ Who doesn’t love the baking, the fellowship, the gift-giving, and the nostalgic feelings that come with seasonal songs? Yet, there is a longing for something more in the midst of it all. It’s something that John the Baptist points to in our Gospel today if we have ears to hear the word of God that he proclaimed.

His message may seem eccentric and out of sync with modern tastes, yet his “baptism for the forgiveness of sins”² is always relevant. Those mountains and hills John speaks about are his way of challenging those obstacles of human pride and resistance that get in the way of God’s purposes. And those valleys that his prophetic rhetoric alludes to are his way of pointing out those low and doubt-filled fearful places that need addressing.

In one of his sermons, Deon Johnson articulately expressed this sentiment when he wrote, “We need the voice of one crying out in the wilderness because things happen in the wilderness. Our needs are raw and real in the wilderness, and sweet words

¹ Written in 1963 by [Edward Pola](#) and [George Wyle](#).

² Luke 3:3

and hollow sentiments are not enough. We need prophets, especially when we have grown so full of ourselves that we have become spiritually deaf to the call that would bring us back to God and a place where hope is found.

People were drawn to John because he offered them a chance to come clean—to stop pretending they were OK when they weren’t. He called people to wake up—to turn around and make room for a new start so they would not miss out on what God was about to do. God’s word is always waiting to be discovered by those hungry for genuine spiritual reality.

A social researcher and storyteller named Brene Brown acknowledged this human longing in a seminar she gave entitled “Expanding Perception.” In it, she depicts compelling stories about the importance of human and spiritual connection. She says that “the ability to feel connected is why we are here. It is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives.”³

John’s ministry was focused on that same spiritual reality because, through his baptism of repentance, one becomes “*Free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.*”⁴ Consequently, John’s ministry turned out to be more therapeutic than once thought because many fear that their shameful acts have somehow disqualified them from being loveable. But John would disagree. The most surprising thing about shame is that genuine spiritual connection and transformation are possible when admitted and out in the open.

This kind of open vulnerability is a message close to the heart of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul affirmed this when he

³ Brene Brown, Seminar on “Expanding Perception”

⁴ Luke 1:74b-75, taken from Canticle 16: The Song of Zechariah, BCP, p. 92.

wrote to Timothy, stating, ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”***⁵ Paul’s past failures and sinfulness did not make him unacceptable. Instead, it made his message more believable and authentic because other people could more easily identify with him.

So let the cliffs of human pride and arrogance be leveled and ***“every hill and mountain brought low,”***⁶ For you and I can see the glory of God revealed right in our own lives if we are willing to bring our hearts with all of its feelings of unworthiness into the light of his presence for healing and forgiveness.

To us, the Word of God has come, and it brings with it joy. It is a joy that Paul expressed as he gave thanks for the Phillipians every time he remembered them.⁷ It is a joy conveyed in the ***“confidence that what God has begun in us, he will complete.”***⁸ It is a joy that rings out as our love ***“abounds more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.”***⁹ That knowledge and insight break through stubborn human resistance and expose shallow pretenses. It calls us to make our love genuine so that others can see the practical fruits of righteousness, as we share a coat when we have two or share food when we have extra. They call us to make the expression of

⁵ 1 Timothy 1:15

⁶ Isaiah 40:4b

⁷ Philippians 1:3

⁸ Philippians 1:6

⁹ Philippians 1:11

our faith tangible so that “others can see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.”¹⁰

The world needs the hope that we have, especially as events on the world’s stage seem more and more confusing and desperate. We hold in our faith the most radiant star on the horizon of human history. So, let us make straight paths for him as we prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:16