

“IT ALL BEGINS IN A WILDERNESS”

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Compare with me where we typically begin our journey to Christmas and where our assigned Sunday Gospel reading takes us. We begin with getting out the tried-and-true decorations, planning the festive menu for the party, making our shopping lists for loved ones, with visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads.

The lectionary has John the Baptizer’s sobering message emerging from a wilderness, a desolate desert, an alien setting teeming with violent beasts, trackless disorienting. Wilderness mean wild, places where people feel *bewildered*, unable to explain evil tidings. In that setting, the steely-eyed prophet implores us to turn our lives around, to get in step with God’s deep retrenchment coming as his ways reverse our brokenness, as his blessed order transforms our lonely chaos. Who wants to hear that? is my reaction every year. Exactly no one, comes the answer.

This year, with the hateful atrocity in San Bernardino, everything changes. If we are serious about God’s salvation covering the entire earth, we see more clearly why we must start the journey with hard truth rather than in a gingerbread house. As I’ve said before memorial services, our faith was made for such a day as this.

An African pastor once told a pastor acquaintance of mine he felt sorry for North American pastors. My minister friend was incredulous, given the poverty, the political oppression of the Church and all the pastors who end up in prison in Africa. “There is just so much here,” the African pastor continued. “You have so much freedom, so many things. What is left to offer people? What needs do they have for which the Gospel could be fulfillment? There is so much fulfillment, and so little emptiness,” he continued. “But the Gospel feeds on our emptiness.” The guy is right. The Gospel not only *feeds* upon our emptiness, it *fills* our emptiness.

This year as preacher I need not persuade those already filled with good things that there’s also gnawing emptiness. Last Wednesday reminded all of us of that. And if picturing the grief of 14 families now with an aching lifelong wound, or the six-month old child abandoned by her parents’ in favor of a murderous rampage does not put us in touch with deep emptiness, we are either callous or shallow. And if salvation doesn’t include such deep and dark ache as this, what good is it?

Welcome to Christmas in the church where we observe something called Advent. Where we let human suffering into the conversation and begin with those most broken as we seek to grasp the rescue plan God will put in place through Jesus. As Bill reminded us, Advent surfaces yearning that too easily gets buried in holiday debris. The yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world. The yearning for a Messiah to bring his reign of peace and righteousness to the world. Advent is our invitation to do more than skate across the happy holidays surface. Advent means digging deep to prepare ourselves for Christ’s transforming reign.

It takes courage to talk like this in the midst of our prosperity. It takes candor to admit to an emergent sense that things aren't right despite glossy appearances. Some criticize such talk, preferring instead a warm feel-good approach, like you get at the end of the half an hour situation comedy, where everything gets magically put right and everybody falls into everyone else's arms. That is the world's sense of the truth. We must move by God's unflinching sense of the truth.

For we travel to the beat of a different drummer. In the church we admit to such profound longings, and prophets like John the Baptizer rise to describe them. If we cannot tell the whole truth about our lives here in the church, then all is lost. For such gnawing truths will not be articulated elsewhere. Some peg the church as doom and gloom in that we can't let such dogs sleep. But church can also be perceived as an isle of honesty amid a society amid much falsehood and deceit. It takes honesty and conviction to admit it when everything is not as it should be. And to insist that truth not be suppressed but rather addressed by God's answers.

How can we know we're lost if we always perceive ourselves as fully found? How can we know which questions to ask if we imagine we have all the answers? How can we know emptiness within if we tell ourselves we are already fulfilled? Or how can we hunger and thirst for righteousness when we never lack anything?

The real question is how badly do we wish to see by the fragile light of Christmas? So badly that we're willing first to enter the dark places where few want to venture? In order to see the stars of the highest heavens, and to see that one star leading to the fugitive, persecuted family huddled against the cold in a barn, we must willingly enter the earth's darkness here below. Are we up to such honesty?

Consider all of this against the backdrop of how we handle Advent. Consider our restraint decorating this holy space. Not like Bergdorf's lavish, stylish windows. Consider how in worship we slowly introduce Christmas carols and instead start with restrained hymns first pausing over Advent as a time of deep assessment. Consider how some churches offer elaborate Blue Christmas services attended by a mere handful striving to face deep loss and excruciating turns in their health.

Consider the lectionary texts we are assigned like John the Baptist coming out of his wilderness deprivations and inviting us to find emptiness within our own lives. No Rudolph, Frosty, or Grinch here. What is the point? All of it speaks of desire and expectation and hunger and need and longing and yearning in a land that has forgotten or suppressed them. What happens here in Advent is remarkable.

For underneath the many layers of stuff overlaying more layers of opportunity overlaying still other unexplored options is a craving that none of them can touch. During Advent we expose that craving so at Christmas we receive God's answer.

So hear the good news this second Sunday in Advent, those who know the feeling of exile in your own home, those well acquainted with wilderness spaces.

Hear the Gospel that God makes a whole new way for the lost and wandering. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Yes, all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Amen.