

Walking in the Way of Peace

A Sermon for the Feast of St. John the Baptist

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St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

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Years ago, while holidaying in Quebec City, we wondered what the commotion was all about on the street below our wonderful apartment at the base of the Funicular. . . We discovered it was St. Jean Baptiste Day, and the city was partying. Who knew? Not us obviously.

Here at St. Paul's we don't get to saints' days that often. There is however tremendous value in examining, as best we can (the challenges of time, distance and cultural difference admitted) the lives of faithful pilgrims who have gone before us. In many ways, things are different "then from now"—in other ways, little has changed—people are still *people*; we all *depend on the land*; *fear* and *hope* touch us.

We can learn from and instruct each other. There have been, and are now, prophets in our midst; but who are they? What drives them? How do we sense, discover (and welcome) their voice? Paul Simon reminds us that "the signs of the prophets are written on the subway walls." Maybe we should host a downtown graffiti tour—might be eye-opening—as Thomas Merton advises, pay attention . . . and you shall indeed "see."

I draw today upon a fifth-century sermon by Augustine of Hippo, who noted that in the history of the Church, the birthday of only two ancients are memorialized—Jesus, and John—and to John we direct our attention today. John is the ultimate "hinge" character, "hinge" being a term applied to the author Thomas Cahill, whose "Hinges of History" book series includes *How the Irish Saved Civilization*; *The Gift of the Jews*; and *The Desire of the Everlasting Hills*. Throughout history, certain people, or

peoples, have bridged times and spaces so that culture could develop and thrive. Thus for Augustine,

(John) represents times past and is the herald of the new era to come. As a representative of the past, he is born of aged parents; as a herald of the new era, he is declared to be a prophet while still in his mother's womb. In that womb he had already been designated a prophet, even before he was born.

John's situation reminds me of Don (name changed) a student at theological seminary (he even looked like my vision of John the Baptist). Don was dedicated at birth by a zealous parent to serve God in the style and spirit of evangelist Billy Graham; a very heavy burden. He lived, and I think continues to live a dynamic, challenging and unique life, in part due to the conditions of his infancy. Such things happen, to some people, sometimes . . . Back to John,

(I)t was revealed that he was to be Christ's precursor, before they ever saw one another. These are divine happenings, going beyond *the limits of our human frailty*.

We discover something about prophecy and the way divine presence, initiative and urgency is discovered "in the limits of human frailty." It's like I say to folks in distress; the solution would be easy if in fact it is easy; which it isn't . . . and therefore you/we struggle." And what do "divine happenings" look, sound and feel like anyway? Augustine continues:

Zechariah is silent and loses his voice until John, the precursor of the Lord, is born and restores his voice. *The silence of Zechariah is nothing but the age of prophecy lying hidden*—obscured, as it were, and concealed before the preaching of Christ.

I love this connection between the silence of the human father and the silence (or absence) of divine speech in the pre-Jesus era. The potential influence of anti-Semitism noted, it's not so much that God or Godly speech is absent, but compared with what is to come, for Christians, all that possibility, challenge, and blessing, is released as enthusiastic speech—and on the occasion of a new birth, all possibility is itself “birthed.”

Thinking locally, I really don't like the new tagline for Kamloops: “Boldly Unscripted.” To me, it seems too vague to carry any real meaning or convey a specific expectation or attraction. It is however perfect for the era of John the Baptist. For indeed, everything is, *boldly unscripted*. Again Augustine,

The release of Zechariah's voice at the birth of John is a parallel to the rending of the veil at Christ's crucifixion. If John were announcing his own coming, Zechariah's lips would not have been opened. The tongue is loosened *because a voice is born*.

For us and for the Israel of Jesus' and John's day, the challenge is to look forward, with confidence and insight, and consider less *what is*, but *what can be*. ACTS records Paul's history lesson, ending with these words:

Of this man's posterity God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised; before his coming John had already proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. And as John was finishing his work, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet.' My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent."

So if we began our reflection with an acknowledgement that John straddles two eras, the first described by Paul in Acts, and latterly the ministry of John the Baptizer, it remains to consider *the direction of salvation now*. What new vision can emerge as salvation continues to unfold locally and globally. Good religious practice is not simply the repetition of things past. In today's church we usually sing Zechariah's song. So I hear music accompanying these prophetic words:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty saviour for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And of John's role in all this there is the notion of peace:

(Y)ou, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, *the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*”

With good memories of yesterday's 43rd annual *Walk for Peace, Social Justice and the Environment*, I hope you can join me in a prayer, that light will indeed come for those *who sit in, who occupy*, and some days seem to *thrive in the darkness*. Then we can all be drawn by Christ into walking the way of peace, together. Amen.