

## God Comes to a Barren Land (series)- Hope comes

Isaiah 11:1-6 Psalm 72:1-7 Matthew 3:1-12

### Advent Communion Homily

Today's story begins in complete silence. Complete silence. That's something you and I have rarely heard, with all the noise coming at us from our cell phones and our computers, our iPods and our mp3's, our televisions and our radios, day after day, moment after moment. So much noise surrounds us and noise is so hard for a sound to cut through, to be recognized among. It gets lost, distorted, missed. Silence emphasizes a sound, amplifies it, makes it clear. In this morning's gospel lesson a silence of 400 years is broken. Don't misunderstand me, not everyone was silent during this period. Women and men were talking. Boys and girls were giggling. But there was no prophet speaking the Word of the LORD. No one was truthfully saying, "Thus says the LORD..." Into this silence, John spoke.

Before we go any further, take a moment to let your heart grow silent and your mind grow calm. Don't worry about all the Christmas Fest plans and the decorating, the gifts you have to buy and the parties you have to prepare for. Let it all go. You can't do anything about it in these next few minutes anyway. Just let them go and focus on the Word. This time is for you and God to get reacquainted again. These words are given to lead us back to Him, to fill us with hope. The communion to come is to give us the energy to live out there in the world, to make a difference for the Kingdom of God. Don't let any noise get in the way. Bring your silence and your stillness before God. And you'll hear what you need to hear.

The voice which breaks our silence today is the voice of John the Baptist, who may rightly be called the last of the Old Testament Prophets. The people back then recognized him as a prophet. Matthew described the way he looked- the camel hair clothing, the leather belt, the wilderness living, and everyone recognized that he looked like the way the prophet Elijah was described in II Kings chapter 1. And everyone knew that Elijah was to come to announce the return of the Messiah, the ruler who would lead Israel into a new set of glory days, just as King David had led Israel into glory days of old. John the Baptist was functioning as a Herald by announcing the coming of the King. In the ancient world, a herald was one who went ahead of a king's chariot to prepare the road. He would command a crew which would smooth out the usually rough roads of that day by filling potholes and removing boulders. He was kind of like an advance team preparing a site before a speaker gives a talk, like a roadie preparing the stage before a concert, like the motorcade going before a president preparing the crowd for his arrival, making sure everything is safe and clean and ready. The herald would go before the king shouting, "Make way, the King is coming!" In that day just about the only time that potholes would be filled and boulders removed along a road was when royalty was coming.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness to announce that the Kingdom of heaven was coming near. This is the way the great preacher Thomas Long put it: "As the door to a new era swings open, John the Baptist is the ideal hinge. He is dressed like the old age, but he points to the new. His preaching style is vintage Old Israel; his message paves the way for New Israel. He appears to have wandered out of some retirement home for old prophets, but he announces the arrival of one who is even greater than the prophets. He baptizes with the water of the ancient Jordan River; he promises the coming of one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Everything is about to change. The old is passing away; the new presses in. The long, lost night of hopelessness is coming to an end, and John the Baptist is the rooster who awakens the sleeping world with dawn's excited cry."

And into the 400 years of silence and into the confused world that was filled with political intrigue and unscrupulous religious leaders and much oppression and hopeless everywhere, John shouted a word of hope. Repent. Sounds like a strange word of hope to our ears, but it is definitely a word of hope- repent. When we hear that word today we think that that is just an old churchy word designed to make us feel guilty- repent sinner. Stop going to movies, playing cards, dancing, drinking, sleeping with people- that's the way we hear it. That's definitely the way our nonreligious and

nominally religious friends hear it. That is the way many churches preach it- repent is often screamed with anger. Hear it differently today, because making us feel guilty or just angry is not John's point.

Let that word repent speak into the silence of your heart. Calm your mind, and let the Lord quietly tell you what you need to stop focusing on, what you need to turn your attention from so you can turn your attention to Him.

Repent basically means to turn around. Turn from what you are doing and face a different direction. Stop focusing on whatever it is that is consuming your life so you can face the king, because he is coming and you'd better be paying attention.

The scripture says that many people came out to the wilderness to see him. Hurtful words don't draw people out of their daily lives to some hear them, helpful words do, hopeful words do. Then our gospel writer points out two categories of people that were among the crowd, Pharisees and Sadducees, and John does speak some strong words to them. Maybe because of the way he spoke to them we think of repentance as being harsh, but he had to speak hard words to them. They were corrupt religious leaders. Those of you who are doing our Advent study with a small group, what did the chapter this week say about the Pharisees during this time? They were Hasmonians, friends and relatives of the corrupt and evil Herod, collaborators with Rome. They held the positions, they knew the teachings, but they were basically in it for all the power and glory and money that they could get. When they saw the crowds go out to the wilderness they knew that they had to run ahead of the crowds if they were still going to be recognized as leaders. So they jumped into line to be baptized with their people, it wasn't because they wanted anything to change, they simply wanted to maintain their power, to still be heard by those who went to be baptized and thought it was important.

And John looked at them and said, "You are nothing but snakes, cunning, conniving, slithering snakes. I don't believe you are repenting at all, turning toward God at all. If you claim you are repenting, we'd all better see the fruit, see how your life is changed, see how it is better and a blessing to the people. Your heritage, your office means nothing. Turning back and walking your life towards God means everything.

How is this a message of hope? John is saying they can change. After several generations of corrupt leadership, the teachers in the synagogue, the conniving snakes can change. Like a body that walks into the ocean can slowly let the waves wash away the sand and dirt and sweat that have accumulated on it, can let the healing salt water tend to its wounds, turning towards God and letting the Holy Spirit and the fire work in your life to wash away the dirt, burn away the imperfections, and heal the hurts, this can change even the most difficult and shameful life.

Jump into the waters and repent. Turn your life around. Walk towards God, towards the kingdom, towards Jesus, and watch the barren parts of your life become fruitful and grow.

Turning towards God is something we have to do every day. Every day. It is a practice, it is a discipline, it is a regime. John's call to repent, to turn around, to look towards the kingdom can redirect our daily living and make us stronger disciples and happier people. And that's why I am going to end this morning's message with a free offer that will hopefully speak into your morning silence daily. Following the service pick one of these up for your home. Our office spent last week producing 350 of these. It is a prayer that you can say each morning as you shower. It's laminated. It has a high-tech connective device called a rubber band to hook it in your shower. It is a prayer written by Adam Hamilton and it goes like this- "Lord, as I enter the water to bathe I remember my baptism. Wash me by your grace. Fill me with your Spirit. Renew my soul. I pray that I might live as your child today, and honor you in all that I do." I think your life will bear more fruit if you start off each morning taking this prayer to heart. I think our church might have more power, make more of a difference for the Kingdom, if we all start off each morning taking this prayer to heart.

You are God's child. Face up to it. Turn towards him. Repent. And see the new life God has for you and for the world through you. Let us pray...