

"The Outsider"

Sermon on Sunday, December 4, 2021

Every year, on the second Sunday of Advent, a man enters the big stage who doesn't seem to belong to a House of God. He just takes over the pulpit and preaches, his voice sharp, his demeanor bullish, his message un-Lutheran. What comes out of his mouth is radical and puts us immediately on the defense. Blatantly defying church protocol, disregarding the "All are welcome!" signs, he makes some people extremely uncomfortable. You might say that he has a knack for offending people. By all accounts - and there are several in the gospels - this man is a polarizing figure. He eats a strange diet; he doesn't care about his appearance; he reeks. His language is direct. Don't let me translate "Brood of Vipers" into contemporary expressions. It wouldn't be pretty. John is angry at what's wrong in society.

Every year God sends this agitated man from the wilderness of his idealized expectations into our nicely decorated church during the weeks leading up to Christmas, to talk about repentance, to address the kinds of preparations we tend to omit. His call for change goes right through our seasonal glitz. This outsider is not interested in better looks during the holiday season. He wants change.

And suddenly, when you think about it, John the Baptist, this ancient prophet, makes sense. Even the most optimistic and patriotic people among us, those who bleed red, white, and blue, must admit that the state of society could be better, much better in fact. I am not even talking about the usual - our political system, immigration, criminal justice, the economy, the dysfunctions in our government and democratic system, or any of the issues that may come to mind when we think about the state of America. There is never a shortage of things that need to be fixed. I am thinking about the ways in which we all can make a difference in that slice of world which we occupy. I am talking about old-fashioned values that we can live by. See, John was not a revolutionary. He wasn't trying to change the government of his time. He was interested in hands-on things. If you were tax collector he would say to you, "Don't overcharge." If you were a Roman soldier, he

would ask you to do your duty but not take advantage of your position of power over people." When he talked about repentance, it was very practical, not mystical.

In that same vein, I was touched by the example that our late church member Alfred Ledder set. I spoke about that in his eulogy yesterday. Throughout his life he gave, not just to the church, but also to society at large, to people in his community. He took on unpaid leadership roles for institutions. He used his skills as a banker to help people complete forms related to taxes. All very practical things, not mystical. All very doable. Making a difference.

Last week, I received my first Christmas gift. It came four weeks early. It came from Scott Zenker. He had worked on my chainsaw, which stubbornly wouldn't start for me. Chainsaws can be more temperamental than people, did you know that? What did Scott do? Nothing big. He adjusted the chain in the right ways and suddenly it worked. In the same way, it can be little things sometimes that make a difference in your life, in the lives of others.

What this outsider - John the Baptist - is telling us at this time of year is about those little adjustments. There is no advent season for us unless we ask ourselves whether we are on the right path, whether we need to change or adjust some things. It's the gift of self-reflection, as I see it. Lord, what do you need me to do?

As I was preparing my sermon, I tried to think of contemporary figures that have played roles like John the Baptist. My go-to-person is the late Nelson Mandela. He challenged the Apartheid regime and the Western world to repent, even as he was confined to the wilderness of a prison. But he was too nice to be compared to John the Baptist. I came up with a character that compares more closely to the edgy Baptist, a fictional person. The main heroine in Stieg Larsson's wildly successful trilogy, "The girl with the dragon tattoo."

Lisbeth Salander is an outsider of Swedish society. She is not nice, not dressed to conform, not interested in pleasing people, quite raw. But she has an amazing moral compass, and her appeal is that she goes right through all the non-sense to the heart of the matter, relentlessly calling evil "evil" and making no pretensions about herself.

The role of outsiders is not to please, not even to be role models for people, but to cut through the non-sense and call us back to the most essential values of life: be honest! - be fair! - be the best person you can be! Remember that God has given you a soul - listen to it and listen to your best instincts! "Prepare the way for the Lord!" And make the little adjustments that may be needed at this stage in your life. Perhaps they are not so little.

Amen.