

3 Advent (B) – 2014

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[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#); [Psalm 126](#) or [Canticle 3](#) or [Canticle 15](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#); [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

Inflection is everything.

What do Americans call the game of table tennis? Do we say, “ping pong”? No. We call it “*ping* pong.”

In English, men’s names such as David, Matthew, Isaac, Daniel, are emphasized on the first syllable. We tend to inflect with emphasis. In other languages inflection is handled differently. In Turkish, for example, even a four-syllable man’s name such as Selahattin [“Se-la-ha-teen”] has equal emphasis on each syllable.

Inflection can make all the difference.

Imagine a husband and wife: One says something, tells a story, perhaps makes a request, and the other says, “Yes, dear.”

Now, is that “Yes, dear, I fly to do thy bidding, I fall at your feet, I adore the ground you walk on”? Or is that “Yes, dear, grumble, grumble, darn you, drat this day anyway”?

Inflection. Such a simple thing.

It would be good to know the inflection the questioners put on their words when they came to question John.

We have yet another John the Baptist lesson this Third Sunday of Advent. John’s gospel tells the story of priests and Levites from Jerusalem, sent by Jews to ask John, “Who are you?”

There are many ways to ask that question. To snivel and snarl: “*Who are you?*” To be downright rude and dismissive: “*Who are you?*” Or like the caterpillar blowing smoke rings in “Alice in Wonderland,” rather haughty and arrogant and curious: “Whooooo. *Are*. You?”

Inflection is everything, and clearly, it’s an important question they are asking John. The identity of John the Baptist is explored, questioned, established in all four gospels. He is asked this question in today’s reading in the context of “testimony,” according to John’s gospel.

It’s a question that Jesus much later puts to his disciples, challenging them to answer: “Who do you, my disciples, say I am?”

The story of John the Baptizer is in all the gospels. That level of agreement between evangelists is unusual, so this must be something significant.

“Who are you?” they ask John.

And what is his answer?

John says he is not the Christ, not the Messiah – not Elijah or any other hero. He says he is not the prophet. John says, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

This quotes a lovely passage from the prophet Isaiah, but what does it mean?

Mark's gospel makes things a little clearer by invoking a passage from the prophet Malachi: "I am sending my messenger before you to prepare your way."

And in the Gospel of Luke we hear a fuller text from Isaiah:

"Prepare the way of the Lord.
Make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled –
Every mountain and hill shall be made low.
And the crooked shall be made straight –
And the rough ways made smooth."

The religious authorities had sent folks to question John, and John quoted scripture to them. Their own scripture! Their own prophet. Every one of them would have been familiar with this text, would have recognized it. They knew it, studied it, memorized it.

Even in our own day, when most of us know very little of the Bible, we will recognize this passage from Isaiah because we listen to Handel's "Messiah" at this time of year. Do any of you, in hearing the words of this passage, hear Handel's music in the background? Handel's "Messiah" plays on PA systems in department stores, and in many communities it is a center point of holiday celebration. This is a well-known biblical passage in our day.

In John's day, it was the focus of their hope for a Messiah, a great leader and liberator sent from God. They knew these words.

The people came to John and asked, "Who are you?"

And John answered: "I am a voice – a voice crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord. Make paths straight. Fill in low places. Level the high places. Make the crooked bits straight. Make the rough places smooth."

It sounds a lot like instructions for highway engineers, doesn't it?

There are roads in this country – perhaps you have driven one? – that are mostly straight, perhaps even mostly flat, with just one interesting curve. Just one single, solitary, interesting curve. And the road engineers and safety folks decide that one interesting curve has to go.

The idea, we are told, is that accidents often happen at such places, and straightening the curve and flattening the land makes it a safer road. That is essentially the idea with Isaiah's prescription that John quotes.

And John said, "Prepare!"

The season of Advent, which runs from late November or early December until Christmas Eve, is all about preparation. We know we're preparing for the birth of a baby, and some of us may even know that we're expecting the Messiah to come – but there's more to it than that.

John says to the people, "Prepare!" Not "I am preparing," but "*You* prepare." Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the world: Lift up, bring down, straighten, smooth. Level the field on which my people stand, John might say, so that all of my people can bask in the glory of God.

If this lesson is to be instructive at all, then we must hear and heed John the Baptist's proclamation of God's Word. If this lesson is to be instructive for us, then this is also our proclamation, rooted in baptism. We are baptized in the manner of John's baptizing – with water, but in the knowledge of Jesus and strengthened by the promised Holy Spirit of God.

That lays on us some obligations, some responsibilities, which are part of our baptism by definition. Not luxuries. Not conditional. Not optional. Promises made. Vows taken. The proclamation of the Lord's coming put in our mouths.

It's not just John who carries the news.

This is part of the story of Jesus, included in all the gospels and read in Christian communities for nearly 2,000 years to remind us, to embolden us, to open our mouths. Prepare the way of the Lord – even as we are lifting up and filling in and smoothing.

So not only are we to do the work of making that field level, we are to proclaim the work to others in the building up of community.

The men who were sent to question John asked him why he was baptizing if he wasn't the Messiah. In other words, "You're not one of the important ones. Why bother?"

Listen for the inflection.

John, in essence, said: "I do this because I can do no other. I have heard the news, and my mouth is opened, and my heart must love." When John is later asked about Jesus, he says, "This joy of mine is now full."

Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann reminds us:

"Advent is *anticipation of the new community* in the world, wrought by the power of Jesus, mandated by the way of Jesus, and living toward the hope of Jesus. ... The person of Jesus presses us to think about the *people of Jesus*."

In Paul's words, from today's epistle:

"Admonish the idle. Encourage the fainthearted. Help the weak. Be patient with all of them. Do not repay evil for evil. Pray constantly. Give thanks in all things. Hold fast to what is good. Rejoice always!"

We have the joyful duty of this proclamation laid upon us, placed in our hearts for our lives together – and in our mouths for the world to know about the goodness of God.

There is more to Advent than an early "Merry Christmas!"

How will *you* proclaim what you know? Remember: inflection is everything!

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