

Sunday Morning Worship at Brentwood, Dec 4, 2016

Notes for the sermon The Mad Man in the Wilderness (Advent 2)



Ps 72:1-7 and Matt 3:1-12 Sermon Text = Matt 3:3

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight.’”

[Hymns = 122, 126, and 128 in the *Book of Praise*]

Key Ideas

1. You will hear this over and over again this year, as we focus primarily on the Gospel of Matthew, but Matthew tells the story of Jesus, first and foremost, as the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Hebrew Scriptures. So, quoting the prophets for Matthew is a big deal. It has deep significance. It’s a way of reminding both Jew and Gentile that God is now working primarily through Jesus, who is the Messiah promised throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a God who came in the flesh in Jesus Christ, who is working out a loving purpose in human history, and who now invites all people to seek that purpose with Jesus, following him in the creation of the Commonwealth of God
2. In the painting, John the Baptist is portrayed in an interesting pose – in my imagination, he’s saying, “Don’t you people get it? Don’t you get what God is doing here? How can you be so dense?” And the listener response might very well be, “Come on, John! This cousin of yours is hardly how God would come! All those locusts and honey you survived on in the wilderness has twisted your brain!” Jesus certainly isn’t what most of the Jewish people were expecting, especially those in power. All the Gospels make that plain. How God comes to be with them in Jesus is foolish, mad, incomprehensible. What John is saying, and what Jesus says after him, are just wilderness rantings in the minds of many. But, and here’s the key twist in the Gospels, especially in Matthew, it’s in the wilderness that we really confront the purpose and power of what Pope Francis calls a “culture of mercy.” This has been, for Francis, a Year of Mercy. That’s the way God wants us to live. And it challenges to its core our “culture of self-reliance.”
3. I asked the other men in our ‘Saturday Morning Jam’ how they had experienced wilderness in their lives. All are recovering addicts (alcohol and drugs). They gave me permission to talk about this with you. For them, wilderness was a sense of isolation and disconnection in which they wandered with an overpowering sense of self-reliance. I can do this on my own. And the substances or habits seemed to help with that self-reliance. They gave their self-reliance strength. But they wore off and they needed more. They were stuck in substance-reliance. What brought them out of that wilderness, what they learned in that wilderness, is that you can’t do it alone. You need the divine and you need others.

At this point in our ponderings, then ...

That simple truth lies at the heart of what Francis has in mind when he talks about a ‘culture of mercy.’ The idea of ‘righteousness’ that has featured in our Scriptures this morning is really about ‘right relationships’ with God and with others. If that is madness, then count me in. My wilderness experiences convince me of this. I hope yours do too.

Sermon notes of Rev Dr Brian Fraser,
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