

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from December 10, 2006

Rev. Patricia L. Liberty

“Postcards from the Edge”

Scriptures:

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6



John the Baptist was out there. I’m not talking about geography. Yes, he delivered his message on the very outskirts of town. But he was out there ... way out there.

Daniel Clendenin suggests that John delivers his message from the Lunatic Fringe: “He lived in the wilderness around the Dead Sea. He subsisted on a starvation diet, and so did his disciples. He wore clothes even the rummage sale people wouldn’t handle. When he preached, it was fire and brimstone every time.

The kingdom was coming all right, he said, but if you thought it was going to be a pink tea, you’d better think again. If you didn’t shape up, God would give you the axe like an elm with the blight or toss you into the incinerator like what’s left over when you’ve lambasted the good out of wheat. He said being a Jew wouldn’t get you any more points than being a Hottentot, and one of his favorite ways of addressing his congregation was as a snake pit. Your only hope, he said, was to clean up your life as if your life depended on it, which it did, and get baptized in a hurry as a sign that you had.”

Some people thought he was Elijah come back, from the grave and some others thought he was the Messiah, but John would haven one of either. “I’m the one yelling him self blue in the face the wilderness,” he said, quoting Isaiah. “I’m the one trying to knock some sense into your heads.” (*Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, Page 69-70*)

And that’s pretty much what prophets did. With an uncanny ability (read gift), biblical prophets like John the Baptist had a stunning clarity that allowed them to see the gap between God’s desire and what people were actually doing. Then, based on their assessment, they would utter a word from God to provoke God’s people to realign their behavior.

Contrary to popular belief, prophets were not fortunetellers or soothsayers. They did not see into the future or predict what was going to happen. The sum total of their strange little skill set lie in FORTH telling rather than foretelling.

As such, prophets were a versatile lot, serving up words of rebuke, social, religious

and political analysis, as well as hope, encouragement, and care. The common denominator of their message was a word of redemption, a blue print to help us find our way home, and by home I don't mean that place where they have to take us in, but rather that place where we have always belonged.

John sends his postcards from the edge and, because he is so far out there, he's easy to ignore ... The journey home to God's embrace isn't touted by the one in the Brook's Brothers suit but by the ragamuffin with wild hair and wide eyes, munching on bugs with honey stuck in his beard.

From the fringes of society rather than its corridors of power, pleading words call us beyond the comfort afforded us by race, gender, culture, religious, and political allegiance. John's call is to a repentance that puts everything that stands in the way of our ultimate allegiance to God on the chopping block.

It may be interesting to note at this point, that there is little evidence to suggest that anyone ever asked a prophet home for supper more than once. (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, P 73)

And while it is widely thought that prophets were primarily travel agents for guilt trips, there is far more evidence to suggest that they were motivated by their passion for God and a deep desire that people might beat a path home to the One whose door was always open, waiting to welcome the most wayward of whoever happened to be in earshot.

It occurs to me that guilt is not a great motivator. Oh sure, it can bring about change but it also totes a big sack of resentment, anger, and shame around and behind it. I think God hopes for more than an anxiety- and fear-based relationship, some of our early religious training to the contrary notwithstanding.

Inducing guilt is not the goal of prophecy. That's not to say that a little guilt might come along as part of the package when we gauge the distance between our priorities and the nearest outpost of the kingdom, but that's another sermon.

The primary incentive is not guilt; it's love. The prophets had such deep fire in the belly, such great passion for the truth of who God is that their deepest desire, their greatest motivation was that people would know, and I mean know in their bones not just in their heads, the deep, deep love and great passionate desire of God.

The place of emptiness and ache ...that's what the prophet is talking about.

The deep hunger left in the wake of the ones who have sped off and left you alone ... that's what the prophet is talking about.

The brokenness of world where children never live to see their 10th birthday and even more go to bed hungry every night ... that's what the prophet is talking about.

The same God who reaches to mend our broken hearts and weeps at our deepest pain also weeps at the bedside of those dying children.

The job of the prophet is to connect the dots so that whatever is central in our life is adjusted to be what is central in God's and then invite us to bridge the gap between our front door and God's.

Repentance is a word that has inherited a bad rap. Laden with images of TV preachers and, I guess, John the Baptist with his wooly hair and buggy beard doesn't help either ... The dominant message of repentance is peppered with brimstone and hollering and threats of where we all might be headed. It makes repentance seem like the castor oil of religious life.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, and it literally means to "get a new heart". It is not a function beating one's breast and saying penance. Part of what got John the Baptist in so much trouble is that his call to repentance stood in stark contrast to the Pharisaic religion of his time that focused on outward behavior. What John called for, and what Jesus later echoed, was a call to a new heart, a new faith a deeper connection to God ... whatever change in behavior that might come would be a fruit of relationship with God.

Buechner notes, "To repent is to come to your sense. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry' than to the future and saying, 'Wow'". (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 79)

Repentance makes vital faith possible. It acknowledges that, at our best, we are alienated from much of what truly matters, that parts of our lives are broken, and much of what we do to try and glue the pieces together isn't working.

Repentance is that gracious, life-giving opportunity that allows us to pitch the "assemble your own life instruction book" and take up a more comprehensive guide, authored by the one who desires nothing less than to love us, heal us, hold us and send our own postcards from the edge. Amen.

