The intrusive prophet

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2013.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Matthew 3:7-9

The scriptures today are all about hope and expectation. Isaiah’s prophecy foretells the coming of a Savior who will have the qualities of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength and of knowledge and reverence for God. The righteousness of the Savior will enable the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid and the lion and the calf to dwell together. People with totally divergent backgrounds and motives will be able to work out their differences. Another expression of hope is found in the royal psalm expressing hope for a king to rule the nations with righteousness, bringing prosperity to the people, rescuing the poor and crushing the oppressor. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes with the hope that the followers of Christ learn to live in harmony with one voice glorifying God.

There is also an urgent warning. Saint Matthew describes how God chose the remarkable character of John the Baptist as the prophetic “voice crying in the wilderness” to herald the coming of Christ. John’s rough-hewn style is difficult for those who have a hard time accepting the testimony of a man clad in animal skins subsisting on locusts and wild honey. God knew that John was the right choice to be the advance man for Christ because he is not afraid to speak the truth clearly and boldly. This is what God wanted and this is what we get in the person of John the Baptist.

Here is a man who is both disarming and convincing in an unorthodox way. I can believe in someone who speaks God’s truth without worrying about what other people think. He boldly tells us what we need to hear in his forceful and direct way. It is never easy being confronted with the truth about ourselves.

Much of John’s authenticity comes from the simplicity of his life style. Because he lives off the land, he is what we call “the salt of the earth.” His ascetic life style comes from his early years living in the bleak Judean desert near the Dead Sea where he was free from worldly concerns and comforts. What makes John so authentic as a prophet is that he is so personally close to the God that he can speak for God.

His other outstanding quality is that he never calls attention to himself. The last thing he wants is for people to think that he is the Christ. He possesses that essential quality of letting the light of Christ shine through him but never on him. He always points beyond himself to the arrival of the Savior. We can trust a man like that. He has no personal agenda, is authentic, a man totally without pretense who lives what he preaches.

John the Baptist is intrusive because he invades our comfortable world. He challenges our complacency and questions our assumptions. He reaches into our inner person and challenges what we take for granted. He warns us not to delay in making the necessary changes in our lives. Repentance is all about changes that will make a difference. We all need people in our lives that tell us what we may not want to hear but need to know. Be thankful for those on whom you can rely to be completely honest with you. You may not want to listen to what they have to say, but if they care about you they tell you what you need to hear. It may take a while to appreciate what they say but we can trust them if we know they care for us. They are different from those who claim to be brutally honest but are more interested in being brutal than honest.

If what God expects of us seems intrusive, if we are so complacent and so accepting of our old patterns of living, if we are in denial and are unwilling to change, we can be thankful for those who care enough to tell us what we need to hear. None of us likes having a guilt trip laid on us, but when it comes to our spiritual health and wellbeing, there are times when we need to listen to those whom we know and trust who reach the inner voice of our conscience.

It takes great personal strength to admit to our faults and shortcomings and a strong sense of self to face up to them and do what is necessary to overcome them. The first step is always the hardest. The longer the issues are ignored, the harder it is to come to terms with them.
The message of John the Baptist intrudes upon our lives because we can be too comfortable with the familiar but unhealthy patterns of our lives. We can become so accustomed to adverse conditions that we ignore them. Denial won’t make them go away. Neither will procrastination. Repentance is necessary to turn around our lives by breaking out of old habits to gain healthier and better ones.

Change begins with naming the problem and identifying what alienates us from God and each other. It may be a lack of patience or a temper that has become unmanageable. It may be an unwillingness to express feelings appropriately or being unable to express them at all. Or, it may be self-centered behavior born out of lack of self-esteem. We are all capable of changing our behavior patterns. Once that first step is taken, all of us welcome the refreshing change.

Nelson Mandela was so much a part of transforming the life and culture of South Africa. His remarkable life reminds us how freedom and equality can take hold and change a whole nation. What is most remarkable about this towering figure is how he never sought retribution, but upheld the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation for those who had been part of the system of apartheid.

We welcome the way Christ intrudes upon our life and affirms our better self. We listen to the voice crying out in the wilderness that challenges all of us to grow in new and better ways. The spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation is best gift we can give to each other. There is no better time than the present to make those gifts a reality. Now is the time, not tomorrow, not next week, but now.