

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
December 2, 2018
Luke 3:1-6

Crying Out in the Wilderness: the urgency of now.

A minister waited in line to have his car filled with gas just before a long holiday weekend. The attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him. Finally, the attendant motioned him toward a vacant pump. “Reverend,” said the young man, “I’m so sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip.” The minister chuckled, “I know what you mean. It’s the same in my business.”

When I worked in politics there always seemed to be deadlines to meet. This report was due, that speech needed to be written by a certain time, a filing deadline needed to be met to get your candidate’s name on the ballot, and the markup for a bill was going to be on such and such a date preceding the full committee vote. We had a saying in the Congressman’s office that “lateness comes soon.”

It seems the days are flying by for me in this time of my life, folks. I think there is this phenomenon about time. When you’re young and have to wait for something time seems to slow down, to drag by, days seem to take forever till you get that thing you want or go to that place you want to go to. When you get older and you’re busy working in your job, taking care of your family, doing what needs to be done around home, and trying to have a social life at the same time the days just fly by. I feel like I’ve been riding a jet plane these past eight years here with you at Maple Street Church.

None of us knows how much time on this earth is allotted to us. When we are young it seems like an eternity until you turn 16 to get your driver’s license, or 21 to have that coming of age celebration. When we get old before you know it you’re signing up for Medicare and Social Security and the muscle aches and body pains come more often and hang around longer. Life can pass us by in the blink of an eye.

John the Baptist seemed to grasp the sacred urgency of the now. He went around the countryside we are told preaching a “baptism of repentance.” Now, I don’t think John was like those fellows you see on street corner today holding up signs proclaiming “Repent Now or Else.” The original Greek word for repentance had the meaning of “turning your life around,” or taking a different path than you were on. And, it wasn’t all about doing this just so you can claim some reward in heaven for all your good deeds. Rather, it was about creating a world where the love of God could prevail over the evil deeds of the day. It was about preparing a pathway into living in God’s kingdom rather than buying into the avarice, mean-spiritedness, and power-seeking of under the reign of Caesar.

At times for John and his disciples and for Jesus and his disciples, too, their message of the Good News of God's unconditional love, forgiveness, and generosity of spirit, must have felt like they were truly "crying out in the wilderness." I wonder, how many of you feel that way today? How many of you who seek to follow Jesus, love God, and love your neighbor feel like you are traveling and crying out in the wilderness today? I know I do.

When John was urging people to turn from their current path of anger, jealousy, hatred, selfishness, and caring only about themselves and what they could achieve he was imploring people to join a movement that by following God and sharing God's love with their neighbor they could indeed, make a difference that would make, "every valley [full], and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." "All flesh see the salvation of God." John wanted people to feel the urgency of now and changing the world now so that the saving grace of God could be shared among people now. He wasn't warning of some dire apocalypse. He was preparing the people for an even more radical message that was going to be taught by Jesus that the kingdom of God is very near, has come close, is right before your eyes if you will only enter in. My friends, every culture in every age, has had to struggle against their demons. Their demons are the brokenness within them causing them to seek power rather than peace, monetary riches rather than being rich in sharing the resources of the earth, trampling over the lives of the powerless, putting their own welfare first over the welfare and health of the whole community of people, building walls to keep out those who are different. The church today, the Body of Christ, today needs to be the one crying out in the wilderness that these things are not representative of the Kingdom of God. Too often these days the church is complicit in abiding some sins in order to win what they think are more important victories. We used to call that "making a deal with the devil." My friends, you and I, the people of the church need to be crying out in the wilderness and preparing the way for the message of Jesus to spread beyond these walls and into the streets of our community. Silence is not golden. If we believe that having faith and following God means really loving your neighbor, being generous in all things, that the last shall be first and first shall be last, that we are created in the image of God, and that God called the earth and all that God created good and that its worth being good stewards of, than the church cannot be silent. The church, the Body of Christ must cry out in this present wilderness we are in. May we sense the urgency of now. Amen.

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