



Advent 4, Year C – December 6, 2009

Luke 3: 1-6

A homily preached by the Reverend James J. Popham

When Rabbi Shapiro preached at Temple B'nai Tikvah on the Friday evening before he came here for Saturday and Sunday, he made a point of the fact that the great Jewish prayer, reflected in our summary of the law, begins with "Hear, O Israel." It does not begin "See O Israel." And for good reason, according to Rabbi Shapiro. Seeing at best allows a 180 degree perspective. We cannot see behind us. One might even suggest that the Roughriders would have won the Grey Cup if one of the players on the field had been able to see behind him and realize that there were 13 men on the field.

[Now I might digress to say that the Roughriders managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory not because they had too many men on the field on what would have been the last play, but because over the preceding 59 plus minutes they had let their lead diminish to a mere two points and allowed the Alouette to take the ball into field goal range as the final seconds ticked away. But I do digress. I just hate to see blame fall on some poor player who could see only half of what was going on around him.]

Hearing, however, is a 360 degree sense. There are no gaps in our hearing. Hence, we are able and we are called to receive God's message from whatever direction it comes. Even when it comes not from the pulpit, but from the margins. When it comes not from preacher, teacher, or priest, but from a prophet.

Now what is a prophet? This morning, after all, we have heard from the prophet Baruch and about the prophet John the Baptist. In modern times, we have come to think of a prophet as someone with the ability to see or foretell or predict the future. But this is a very circumscribed and convenient definition.

I say convenient because in reality, prophets are pretty inconvenient. We often are disinclined to hear them. Why? Because of what prophets are and what prophets say.

We can come to understand what a prophet is by looking to Luke's introduction of John the Baptist. A prophet is someone chosen and called by God. As the gospel says, "the word of God came to John." Luke even cites scripture to give legitimacy to John the Baptist, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness." John did not just wake up one morning and decide to be a prophet. He heard a call from God, and he responded.

Another characteristic of prophets is their lack of connection to established institutions. Because their authority comes directly from God, they enjoy an autonomy that insiders have sacrificed to their institutional roles. Prophets suffer no dependence on human or institutional schemes of succession or reward. John the Baptist, though of a priestly caste, did not operate inside the structure of institutional Judaism, which at that time had sidled up to Roman power to preserve their privileged position. Both figuratively and literally, John the Baptist conducted his prophetic ministry in the wilderness. As we all know, institutions – and even the church – have self-protective instincts that discourage and typically silence prophetic voices from within. Has anyone ever heard a government proclaim itself corrupt or out of touch? And how difficult is it for a church to acknowledge that it is playing a losing game of catch-up with the culture surrounding it? This is why we would not hesitate to have a rabbi, a voice from the outside, preach here. This is how we expose ourselves to new perspectives and insights that stimulate a fresh look and suggest how we might reform our ways.

So, when true reform – and the requisite repentance that generates reform – comes to an institution, it almost invariably begins with a prophetic voice outside the institution. Consider, for example, that the ordination of the first woman priests in the Anglican Communion was “irregular.” It was out of bounds. It broke the rules. But from the outside of the institutional church, it led the church to change institutionally and normalize the ordination of women. And prophets of environmental stewardship no doubt have spurred many energy companies to research and invest in renewable energy and environmentally protective processes.

Prophets speak from the margins. Because they are on the outside looking in – much like the coach in the press box, who could see the whole field – prophets see with more clarity and depth than the more myopic insiders.

When this distinct vision of the prophet is coupled with divine vision and empowerment, the essence of prophecy is realized – often painfully. And we come to understand why we often do not hear. Luke goes into great detail in placing John the Baptist in his historical context because the prophet’s impact is felt precisely there – in human history. Prophets bring the Godly vision to earth. Prophets speak with moral force and factual clarity to the issues, problems, needs, and failings of society and even its cherished institutions like the government and the church. Like John the Baptist, they call for repentance and reform.

Indeed, we often ignore or discount prophets because they are a pain in the neck. They are as Al Gore might say, purveyors of an “inconvenient truth.” Prophets have been called, “Difficult, testy overcommitted, and repetitive.” They often are like unceasing, insistent broken records, hammering away at us, and calling us to live according to the ethical prescriptions we claim to embrace. Can we stand to hear another word about climate change, or starving refugees in Africa, or displaced Palestinians, or even the homeless in Calgary? That’s a rhetorical question. The prophet’s message may grate, but still we must hear.

I am tempted at times to call prophets zealots, but then I often define zealots as ill-informed whiners. We all remember the doomsayers of Y2k and now of 2012. But prophets are more than that. As God’s emissaries, they have a duty to have a well-informed understanding of the issues they berate us with. Sadly, the uninformed and false prophets tend to discredit their authentic colleagues.

Yet, even when we are confronted by a real prophet, calling us back to live as God’s righteous and compassionate and loving people, we balk. We hear, but do not hear. Our knees jerk. Our defenses go up. We resist. We become deaf to tragedy and our complicity in the ills of society. And how do we treat the prophet. We push them back to the margins. We assail their credibility. We silence them. We deliver their heads on a platter. Or we crucify them.

And how foolish we are. Because prophets do speak to the future. Not just of tragedy to be averted, but of hope. They offer us a better way and plead with us to follow it. This is what John the Baptist announced. And so did his cousin, Jesus. The greatest good news of all. God’s offer of reconciliation to a sinful world. “[T]he crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Amen.