

**2 Advent C    December 9, 2018**  
**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Voices of Prophets**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

Even though he was just a ghost when we met him in the classic story *A Christmas Carol*, Jacob Marley is a darn good prophet. Although his announcement was to an individual rather than to a whole community, Marley announced to his old business partner that he must change his mind and his heart and follow a new way of living, one we followers of Jesus would recognize as being much more Christ-like. In other words, Marley called Ebenezer Scrooge to repent of his sins: his life of isolation from humanity's joys and pains, his miserly hoarding of his money, his time, and himself from the rest of the world.

That is the essence of the role the prophets of the Old Testament: to announce to the People of God a Message from God. Prophets noticed when the People of God were not following the ways of God and called them on it. That usually made prophets unpopular in the eyes of the people who were the recipients of their message. Yet the books of the prophets of the Old Testament were cherished, like the writings of Isaiah that made their way into Luke's Gospel we just heard this morning. Because the prophets didn't always announce God's disappointment with God's People, sometimes the prophets announced messages of hope to a people who waited for God to do something about the many abuses and oppressions they had endured generation after generation. Sometimes the prophets reminded God's People of the times God had intervened in their history and rescued them or led them out of a life of slavery or exile into a new life where they were free to follow God, and that God promised to do so again. And even if such a holy intervention hadn't happened yet, the prophets reminded God's People God does keep God's promises and they can believe and hope in that promise.

That is most likely how Luke's original audience would have understood the section of Isaiah included in today's Gospel lesson we just heard. The section that spoke of leveling the pathway so that God would return to God's People. You see, it was understood this section of Isaiah about valleys being filled in and mountains made low and crooked, winding pathways made straight and easy to follow was an oracle celebrating God leading the Jewish exiles back through the desert to their ancestral homeland after the Babylonian captivity. It would have reminded the listeners of this Gospel that God does care about God's people and has acted in the past to save them. And because God has done this, God will act again, and the next time the prophet Isaiah promised, God's salvation would not be for a few but would be for all peoples.

That's a big promise. One that would be a big game changer, for it would change who could call themselves God's People. It would show the world a new side of God, something new God was up to, something new God was creating.

And it was that promise John the son of Zacharia and Elizabeth – also known as John the Baptist – heard in the wilderness, that lonely place outside of the civilized world where prophets often hear God. That the author of Luke's Gospel included this detail in introducing us to John the Baptist is part of what makes John the Baptist what we might call a prophet's prophet. A prophet who changed the game of prophecy, one who even Jesus will say later in the Gospel that among those born of women there was never anyone greater than John the Baptist.

Scholars agree that John the Baptist is unique among the prophets because he stands at a crossroads of salvation history. He is considered the very last of the Old Testament prophets, and the greatest of them, because he was also a transitional figure who ushers out the old understanding of our relationship with God and announces the new salvation that God is up to. In other words, John doesn't just call people to repent or change themselves, John announced things were changing, in a big way, and such change with God calls for a change in God's people and we who are reading Luke's Gospel today could very easily see how his message of repentance – changing our minds and hearts- applies to us too in this season of Advent.

One of the ways the church year is very different from the calendar year is how we observe these days before Christmas. While the Christmas specials have been on television for weeks already, here in the church we are not reading about the angels and their messages to Joseph and Mary, we haven't even heard about the birth of John the Baptist yet. Instead we are brought to the river where John the Baptist is calling people to repent. His message was not necessarily the stuff of comfort and joy some of our favorite Christmas carols proclaim. But that doesn't mean his message wasn't important. It must be very important because – spoiler alert- John's going to be central in next Sunday's Gospel too. We could say that John the Baptizer is the central figure of Advent. Perhaps because of that powerful, courageous role he played in salvation history of being the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first prophet in the New. Talk about someone who can help us begin to imagine a new and better day, one that looks more like what God dreams for all God's children.

For those of us listening today; it is good to be reminded that when God's people were feeling the loneliness and sorrow and disheartening powerlessness of oppression, God acted. After a long period of silence, when there were no prophets speaking to remind people of God's love and care, John, son of Zacharia and Elizabeth heard God's call and responded with obedience. He announced the truth. He reminded the people

of the ways God had saved them in the past. He announced God was up to something new and that means God's people need to be made new too, to be ready to receive the salvation God was bringing that was unlike any they or their ancestors had heard of.

John preached a repentance that was part of forgiveness, for that is what God's salvation would look like. And we followers of Jesus know the rest of the story. We know about how Jesus showed us God's love by forgiving. Even some of Jesus' last words on the cross were about forgiveness when he said, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Last Sunday I spoke about how Advent is a time when we are invited to imagine a new and better day, the day when Jesus will return and set all the continued injustices to right. And how this is not an easy or sometimes even natural thing to do, as we can be more likely to wallow in our feelings of fear by imagining dystopian fictions than we are to imagine what a world that really does respect the dignity of every human being could look like. Sometimes we need folks like the prophets to help us imagine such a reality.

That is what prophets like John the Baptist can do. They can help us by reminding us of what God has done in the past, what Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was like. They can remind how Jesus forgave those who crucified him, his friends who abandoned him, and those who rejected him. And they can challenge us to repent, to examine our lives and look for places where forgiveness – a key component in God's salvation – is missing. And then find the strength and courage to receive God's forgiveness and then to forgive, not so abuses or wrongs can continue. Quite the opposite, that we can live into forgiveness by creating a new and better day where all life is respected and cared for.

We can do more than imagine, we can follow through and actually do it. We can receive God's forgiveness, and we can forgive, and begin to understand that each time we forgive, we move deeper into that salvation John the Baptist proclaimed was coming, the salvation God made real through Jesus, the salvation that is for all of us, and the salvation we wait to be made real for all people.