

## Make Room for the Word

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 9, 2018

“The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.” – Luke 3:2

Today’s gospel lesson focuses on one of the Bible’s great oddballs. For convenience’s sake, we call him John the Baptist, to distinguish him from the several other Johns who appear in the New Testament: John the Beloved Disciple, who may or may not be the same as John the Evangelist, who may or may not be the author of the book of Revelation, who may or may not be the author of the three epistles of John; and there are others.

John the Baptizer was a truly odd individual. In an age when food was meager for most people and dress was both homespun and limited, John stood out for the lack of sophistication of his diet and his dress. He wore a camel-hair tunic with a leather belt – the attire of a prophet, according to 2 Kings and Zechariah – and he ate bugs. He had nothing good to say about his religious betters, despite the fact that his father was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. And he seems to have innovated two traditions he inherited from his Jewish faith – ritual bathing and inward renewal – that caused some people to think that he was the long-awaited Messiah.

We call him the Baptizer because of the Greek verb *baptidzo*, which first appears in the New Testament and it’s associated first with John. John apparently invented baptism as we understand it. Jews had ritual washings, of course – so did Greeks and Romans – but the verb *baptidzo*, which means to dip or immerse, wasn’t used of those ritual baths. In John’s bible – our Old Testament – those ritual washings were to remove ritual impurity, which contaminated a person, and the priests were in charge of those ritual cleansings.

The prophets, on the other hand, they were concerned with inner conversion or renewal or reorientation or redirection. That’s what they meant by repentance, and that’s what John preached, too, which put him in the tradition of the prophets. But by combining that message of repentance with the ritual of washing – which he called baptism – John was putting together the message of the prophets with the ritual of the priests, and this apparently got a lot of people’s attention.

John became such a big deal in the religious circles around Jerusalem that he began to gather disciples. The New Testament tells us that some people got him and Jesus mixed up – some thought John was the Messiah, others thought Jesus was the Messiah. The fact that Jesus

came to John for baptism suggests that Jesus may have been sufficiently inspired by John's message and way of life to become one of his disciples, before breaking off from John with his own group of followers.

John got the adverse attention not only of the religious authorities, but he also got on the wrong side of political powers in very high places, and crossing them resulted in his death. If this sounds a bit like Jesus' story – preaching a message of repentance, gathering disciples, denouncing corruption, falling foul of the authorities – that's not accidental, because John is portrayed in the Bible as a type of Jesus – a kind of prototype, if you will – and that's what qualified him to be the messenger of the actual Messiah. There was enough overlap in their message and lifestyles that some of their contemporaries confused the messenger with the one he announced.

And it all began with the word of God coming to John in the wilderness, which is the text for this morning's sermon. The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness with such clarity and force that it launched a prophetic ministry that inspired Jesus to be baptized. And as soon as Jesus was baptized, the synoptic gospels tell us, the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness, as it had driven John, so that they both could hear what that Spirit had to say to them.

In the biblical tradition, the wilderness is the go-to place for the Holy Spirit, and those who work to hear the Spirit speaking to them need to join that Spirit where it's already waiting - in the wilderness. You need to get away from both the demands and the allures of human society if you want to be shaped by the Spirit.

That was the lesson Israel learned during those two generations the Hebrew people spent in the wilderness between their life in what you and I call society. They had come from the society of Egypt, one of the most illustrious societies in the ancient world. They were headed north to a land promised to their ancestors to establish their own society – a nation of priests, according to Exodus – that would alter world history for at least the next 3,000 years. The time in the wilderness, described and dismissed as wandering, was also a time of formation, a fact that Israel's prophets never forgot. Away from pharaoh's society, and before they'd built their own society under Saul and David and Solomon, the Israelites lived for forty years with God as their king and their companion. And some people, like the prophets, believed that Israel enjoyed a closeness with God during those years in the wilderness that the nation would never experience again.

“It was I who fed you in the wilderness,” God said to Israel through the prophet Hosea. “When I fed them, they were satisfied. And then, when they were satisfied, their heart grew proud, and they forgot me” (13:5-6). Far from being a place of emptiness and abandonment, the wilderness was Israel's nursery, in which the people of Israel had the opportunity to be nurtured directly by God so that they could grow up into the people of God.

So where is your wilderness? Where is that place where you can go to be shaped by the Spirit? Where do you go to be free of the allures and demands of the works of our hands?

For me, of course, it's the reservation, that 2.5-mile-long ditch carved out by water across thousands of years. Euclid Creek Reservation isn't pure wilderness, of course, which is almost impossible for most of us to get to these days, but it's a close enough approximation for me to feel the difference when I'm there.

I'm never alone – cars are always driving by on the parkway – and civilization is visible at spots through the trees. But the reservation draws me away, into another space, that doesn't include any kind of screen, large or small. And whatever demands may be waiting for me at church or at a hospital or at home can wait for the hour or so that it takes me to hang out with the Spirit in the park.

Where is that place of solitude and holy companionship for you? Where do you go to find the room in your cluttered life for the word of God to come to you? It's probably not at the kitchen table – too many reminders of the daily round. It's probably not in front of any kind of screen – too many distracting waves to surf. And it's not where you go to volunteer or babysit or keep someone company, salutary as all of those are.

No, the wilderness is somewhere else, somewhere without those attractions, distractions, and obligations. The wilderness is the place of opportunity, where the Spirit of divine love – God, we say in shorthand – can speak and shape and guide and comfort. But the Spirit won't force its way in because it's love, after all, and love never coerces, it only invites. You have to find the space outside of your self to help create the space inside of your self where the word of God can find a home.

And that takes work, the hardest of which is to free ourselves from the egotistical illusion that we are indispensable. None of us is indispensable, friends. Your parent, your spouse, your child, your pet, or your grandchild – not to mention the world at large – they can and someday will get by just fine without you. It may take some doing, at least initially, but it'll happen; and if it doesn't happen, it won't be because of you. If there's one thing that being an orphan has taught me, it is that none of us is indispensable. You can spend plenty of time in the wilderness, and the world will come to no great harm while you're away.

But if you don't want to waste your wilderness time, you'll have to listen. Stop talking. Silence the voice inside your head as well as the outside voice that so often makes life difficult. Turn off the endless stream of words, so that the word – the real word – can get in edgewise. Don't rehearse your grievances. Don't make plans for dinner. Don't draft emails. Just listen with your heart as well as with your mind. As the book of Revelation says seven times in its opening chapters, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." And who is the church if it's not you?

Make room for the word of God, friends. Find that place of formative, generative, and creative energy where the word of God has room to speak. Make room, and then listen.

“The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.”