

Sermon for Advent 3, Year B

St. Luke/San Lucas 17 December 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Magnificat; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

I'd like to start with a prayer by Steve Shakespeare. Let us pray:

God of unveiled truth, faithful flame in times of darkened sun and waning moon:
Lift up our unknowing hearts, and waken our sleeping love to announce the coming
dawn of unexpected peace; through Jesus Christ, the one who is to come. Amen.¹

Please be seated.

Who are you? That is the question the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked John the Baptizer. Who are you?

John's first response was in the negative, I am not the Messiah. I'm not the hero, come to save you all.

But the priests and Levites persisted. So, if you're not the Messiah, what then? Are you Elijah? Elijah, the great prophet who did not die, but was taken up into the heavens in a fiery chariot, Elijah who, according to Jewish tradition, will return to mark the Messiah's earthly arrival. Once again, John responded in the negative, "I am not Elijah."

The priests and Levites gave it another try. If not the Messiah, if not Elijah the person who comes before the Messiah, perhaps John the Baptizer is a prophet, a messenger, bringing the word of God to the people. Once again, John responds in the negative, "No."

At this point, I imagine the priests and Levites were getting a bit irritated. John wasn't helping them out any—his responses were getting shorter and shorter. "Who are you?" they asked. "What do you say about yourself?"

Finally, John provides them with an answer. "I am the voice," he said. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."

"I am the voice." Not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet. Not the hero, not the witness, not the redeemer. But the voice. What does it mean to be "the voice"? To be "a voice"? What does it mean to identify oneself as "the voice"?

Over the last few years, I've had to reflect quite a bit on what it means to have a voice, to find a voice, to be the voice. As most of you know, I spent the first 27 years of my professional life as a diplomat, in the foreign service, primarily as a negotiator for the U.S. government on a wide range of issues.

¹ Steven Shakespeare. The Cottage: Sunday Musings: A Beautiful Advent. Edited by Diana butler Bass. 3 December 2023.

During that period, every time I walked out the door of the Embassy or Mission or State Department, I put on my diplomatic face, masking my feelings and reactions, and presented the agreed U.S. position to the world.

When asked what it was like to be a diplomat, I would often compare it to being on stage— every movement watched closely for subtle signs of possible position changes, words dissected for potential hidden meanings. A skilled negotiator learns her lines, and then imbues them with feelings, emotions, meaning, to make them believable to those on the opposite side of the table—whether she supports the position or not. For years at a time, my words were not my own but rather those of the country I represented.

All those years of enforced silence, of carefully editing my words and actions, left me hesitant, unsure at times how to access, much less express, my own thoughts, feelings, attitudes. What are my positions on the questions of the day? Can I really say that?

As I entered into a new phase of life, I recognized a need, a longing, to find my own voice, to be able to know and express my own views, flavored by the unique experiences of a life nurtured in rural America, educated among free thinkers and elites, and then lived out around the world. From bustling Latin American heights to deep European forests, from vast African savannas to towering Asian peaks, I have walked those paths, drunk those waters, eaten those fruits, and been changed. How, then, to share these wonders? How to find my voice? How to answer that question, “Who are you?”

In my formation journey, in those many, many hours spent in study, in reflection, in prayer, one of the things that kept coming back to me was something I was taught years ago in Sunday School, I am a beloved child of God. I don't have to have to do everything myself, I don't have to have the perfect words for each situation. Rather, I need to open myself up to the Spirit's leading, to proclaim the good news that I, that all of us, have been given.

Each of us has a voice. Each of us has an opportunity to speak, to speak for ourselves, to speak for each other. Each day, as we get up, as we enter the world, we are faced with a choice—how are we going to use our voice. Are we going to speak the words of the world around us? Are we going to repeat the ideas of politicians, social leaders? Are we going to join the throngs calling out for more, more money, more power, more rights, for ourselves and those who look and sound like us?

Or are we going to speak for ourselves? Are we going to use our voices to share with the world our own thoughts, our own views, ones we've spent time and effort formulating? Are we going to stand up for ourselves?

Or, and this is even harder, are we going to use our voices to speak the words God would have us speak? Are we going to cry out in the wilderness? Are we going to speak up when we see someone around us being bullied? It happens a lot in our society today, and it can be uncomfortable to say something. It's so much easier to keep silent,

to avert our eyes, to walk on by. Yet we have been given a voice to call for respect for the dignity of every human. Are we ready to use it?

Are we going to speak up when we see injustice? Are we going to use our voices to call for peace, peace in the Middle East, peace in Ukraine, peace among communities here at home? It's a lot easier to keep silent, or to murmur words of agreement here in church. It's much harder to speak out in public, or even within our families. Yet we have been given a voice to cry out against injustice? Are we ready to use it?

Are we going to speak up when we see those in need? Are we going to use our voices to call for an end to homelessness, for an end to food insecurity, for access to education and medical care for all? Once again, it's much easier to keep silent, to look away when we see people sleeping on the sidewalk or begging for food. Yet we have been given a voice to cry out for the poor, the hungry, the weak and the oppressed? Are we ready to use it?

There are so many needs in the world, so many causes, so many opportunities to cry out. And it is easy to become depressed, overwhelmed by these needs, these injustices. So, I'd like to remind us all of the words of our first reading, the words of the prophet Isaiah who, like us, was blessed to live in interesting times. Isaiah tells us:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

Good news, not angry words, not depressing statements, but good news!

To bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

Good news, words of liberty and justice!

To comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Good news, words of comfort, words of gladness, words of praise!

The Lord loves justice,
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;

Good news, words of justice, words of joy!

The Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Good news, words of righteousness, words of justice, words of praise!

We can use our voices to proclaim these words, this good news. It may seem at times that we, like John the Baptizer, are crying out into a wilderness, into a world that would much rather hear voices of discontent, or violence, or hate. Not everyone will be interested in what we have to say. Some may even speak out against us.

And in that moment, we as we speak God's words, we will need to remember that God loves us, that God wants us to rejoice, to proclaim the good news in a hurting world. In those moments, we need to hold tight to who we are—the beloved children of God.

Amen.