



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Advent 3 Year B

#### Do Not Despise the Words of Prophets [RCL] Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Canticle 15; 1 Thessalonians 6:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Listen to the words of Isaiah:

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

Listen to the words of Mary of Nazareth:

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.

Listen to John the Baptizer:

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. . .”

Listen and try to remember. Do you know any who are oppressed? Have you met with people who are brokenhearted? Have you ever been a captive or have you visited a prisoner?

Now, change direction and remember the mighty on their thrones. Identify them; call out their names as you pray to God, as Mary did, to cast them down. For they are the ones who cause oppression, who take away liberty and make prisoners of the innocent.

Lift up the lowly, oh Lord, we cry with Mary. Fill the hungry with good things. Send the rich away empty, for they are the ones who have emptied everything the poor ever had.

Is any of us courageous enough to cry out with Mary? Yet, this is what the prophets have seen and have proclaimed throughout the centuries. And the people laugh at them while the prophetic voices echo, like that of John's, in the wilderness.

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” This was a real man; he had a mother and a father—Zechariah and Elizabeth. Yet, he was sent from God. He was a prophet. “Who are you?” the people asked, taunting him. Who gave you the right to call us to repentance, to baptize your followers, to remind us of our sins? Who are you?

“I am a voice crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.”

They are familiar with the words of the great prophets of their tradition. But what they don’t know is what he tells them next. “I came as a witness to the light,” he announces, and then he personifies the light— “so that all might believe through *him*.” He is talking about light not as a phenomenon or an effect, but as a person. “I myself am not this light,” John the humble, the profound, tells them, “but I have come to give witness to this light.” And his courageous, prophetic voice continues with the surprising statement: “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

Untying the thongs of sandals was a slave’s job. A slave would have to bend down to untie the sandals of feet that had walked on dusty and dirty unpaved roads. Yet John, wildly popular at that time, claiming crowds of followers, has the humility to say that he is lower than a slave compared to the one he is about to introduce to them as the Light.

Truth, humility, and self-awareness: these are marks of the prophet. There are other marks made visible in the life of Jesus.

A modern-day prophet, the peacemaker Father John Dear, has identified six marks of the prophet in his book on the Beatitudes. One of them is that “the prophet stands in solidarity with the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized. . . . A prophet becomes a voice for the voiceless. Indeed, a prophet is the voice of a voiceless God.” At a time when the poor are despised and neglected, at a time when the very rich rule our world, we need to listen to the prophets who consistently remind us to pay attention. Advent is the right time for paying attention. Remember the oppressed, the voiceless, the widows, the orphans, the poor, we are reminded by the prophets.

Another mark of the prophets is that they are always concerned with justice and peace. Justice and peace are at the heart of God, John Dear reminds us. Not in some future afterlife, but here, on this earth, “as it is in heaven.” We cannot have peace without justice.

Fearlessness and courage are the most evident marks of the prophet. We see those in John; we hear them in his cry, and we know that they brought him to the attention of one of those who sit on their thrones. John’s courage led to his gruesome death.

Jesus of Nazareth took the words of Isaiah and made them his own. He was filled with spirit of the Lord; he was the Lord’s anointed, the Christ. He too proclaimed good news to the poor as he bound the brokenhearted. He was the Light, the evangelist tells us, and the Light cannot be put out; it flickers, but it is not extinguished.

John the Baptizer was a witness to this light. We too are asked to be witnesses to the Light. We cannot have courage to proclaim the good news in a culture filled with the idols of wealth, weapons, and war unless we are filled and guided by God's light.

Do not despise the words of the prophets, St. Paul reminds us. This Advent, as always, may we be filled with their passion for justice and peace and with their courage and fearlessness as we too seek to witness to the Light. Amen.

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