

Zion's UCC of Taborton
Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2017
Rev. Konrad Raup

Voices in the Wilderness
Isaiah 40:1-11, Psalm 85: 1-2 &8-13, Mark 1: 1-8

The author of Mark echoes the prophet Isaiah when he begins his gospel with: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness". I would bet a lot of us feel like that Voice this morning, considering the state of our world.

Old Testament scholars tell us that there were at least two Isaiahs. One wrote before the Jews were exiled to Babylon, and the other wrote after their return. This morning we heard the beginning of the writings of the second Isaiah. Not surprisingly, second Isaiah is far more hopeful than the first Isaiah.

During the time of the first Isaiah, The Jewish people had been suffering. Their nation had been defeated by the Babylonians. Their civilization nearly destroyed. The rich and powerful were carried off into exile., while the common people had been left behind. Yet, they survived as a people . Now the exiles have returned and there was both hope and peace.

I suspect that The Jewish people felt just as discouraged at the time of Mark's gospel as they had at the time of their defeat by the Babylonians. Once again a conqueror ruled them. This time it was Rome. Remember, Mark was writing at the time when the Roman legions were crushing a Jewish revolt. They were laying waste to the land, just as had the Babylonians. Mark wanted his readers to think back to the time of second Isaiah and think: we got through that, we can get through this.

Isaiah promised that God would feed God's flock like a shepherd; God would gather the lambs in God's arms. Mark is telling us that Jesus is that shepherd who will gather the flock.

There are many voices crying out to us this Advent season. My email inbox and my snail mail box are full of their pleas. I can only imagine (since I do not participate in it) what Facebook and other social media outlets are producing. Some are charitable. Some are political. Some are social. And these holiday cries are in addition to all the voices that seek to lure us to one cause or another throughout the rest of the year. Everyone claims that they will solve all the problems of the world if only we send will send them \$10 or \$30 or, if they're really pushy, \$100. They form a loud and persistent chorus, just at the time when we want calm and quiet in our lives.

The people of Jesus ' time faced a similar situation. There were many other religions and religious preachers shouting "follow me" in competition with John the Baptist. We just don't hear about them anymore because they are not important to the Jesus story. But they were there and they drew crowds just like the Baptist.

The question I ask you this morning is: since we believe John was right when he proclaimed the coming of the Christ, were all the others wrong?

That's an important question in our world today when religious conflicts are so often in the headlines. If our faith is true, are all non-Christian beliefs untrue? I think that the majority of Christians would say "yes". But, some people would say "no". They would say that all of us are Children of God, and God speaks to all of creation. Our religions are humanity's imperfect response to God's initiatives.

I invite you to follow along with my thinking about this. If you agree with me that God is the creator, it doesn't matter whether you think it took 6 days or 6 billion years, God was still the artist. Right?

If you agree with me that God was also the creator of humanity, Either by smacking some clay to mold us, or setting the evolutionary process in motion, whereby one-celled microbes eventually became us. Either way, God created human beings.

Having done that, why would God then decide to speak only to one small tribe in the Palestinian highlands and tell everyone else, from Celts, to Africans, to Egyptians, to Asians, to Native Americans that they are doomed? Doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Why would God exclude the biggest part of God's own creation from a relationship with the divine? Doesn't sound to me like the God whom Jesus called "abba".

There's an old tale that tells about The Devil and one of his imps walking down a road. Some distance ahead of them was a person walking in the same direction. Suddenly, the person bent down and picked up something bright and shining. The person became very excited and ran off. "What did that person pick up?" Asked the imp. "A piece of the truth" replied the Devil. "Shouldn't we do something about that?" Asked the imp. "No need", said the Devil. "That person will use their piece of the truth to found a religion and that will cause more havoc than you or I can imagine".

That story ties in with the old adage that a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing. This is altogether too true, especially in religion. It's dangerous because we use our bit of the truth to exclude and lessen everyone else. I am not singling out Christians here. Buddhists do it, Islam does it. Hindus do it, Jews do it. Just about every religion does it. Since we are right, you must be wrong. God speaks to us so God must not speak to you. I keep thinking, How dare we tell God what God can or cannot do!

I believe that God speaks to us in ways that we can understand. That may change for different people in different places and different times. As I've said before, religion is our imperfect attempt to respond to God. We get many things right, but we get some other things wrong. So

does every other religion. If we believe that our way is the only way and that our path is the only path, we may never fully understand what God offers us.

I believe that We must always be open to new revelations. As the United Church of Christ says: “God is still speaking” and I add that we need to listen. We just might learn something from our fellow human beings. That is not to say that everything in other religions is wonderful. Not everything in Christianity is wonderful. But, The thing I like best about the UCC is that no one asks you to check your brains at the door. We are free to be seekers.

Should you sometime be traveling. along the shore of Lake Michigan in the suburbs north of Chicago, you will come across a huge, ornate tower. It's impressive, it's beautiful, and It's the world headquarters of the Baha'i faith. They originated in what is now Iran, but have been forced to leave because of intolerance (a common religious failing, isn't it?). But, there are nearly 50 entry doors into the tower because the baha'is believe that there are innumerable ways to begin our journey home to God.

I would offer that our faith journeys are more like a jigsaw puzzle where the various faiths all hold some of the pieces (those bright and shining bits from our story). Instead of hoarding them, we need to put them together. Some groups have more pieces than others, but all can contribute in some way. Eventually, as we all put our pieces together and discard the ones that don't fit, the reign of God will burst forth.

We have been thinking for weeks now about Jesus' commandment to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love ourselves. How can we even begin to do that, if we believe that our neighbors cannot connect with God? Our children reminded us as they lit the Advent wreath today that this is the Sunday of peace. We will never have peace without understanding, and we will never have understanding without reaching out to one another.

James Finley, who was a Trappist monk, but is now a husband, father, psychologist and author wrote recently that “when we seek what is truest in our own tradition, we discover that we are one with those who seek what is truest in their tradition. There is a point of convergence where we meet one another and we recognize each other as seekers of awakening” (do you remember that word from last week?).

Let us become a people who are followers of Jesus. Let us be a people who are confident enough in our own faith that we can accept the faith of our neighbors. Maybe even talk to them about it. Let us work together to build the reign of God— our mission on this earth.