

When I first read the Gospel for today, and thought of the poor reader trying to get through all those words, some of which I'm not sure how to pronounce, I was tempted to take out those names in the beginning of the passage. At first, I thought they were unnecessary detail, and I know they weren't very nice to throw at Marge. (She certainly rose to the occasion, though, didn't she?) But after a bit of study on the text, I realized I couldn't eliminate them because they were essential to the whole point of the passage. The Biblical scholars note that the whole point of setting up all those specific names of people and their titles and locals, was to establish that they were the power people. We hear the list of emperor, governor, rulers and high priests- and then, in total juxtaposition, we hear that the word of God came NOT to any of them...but to John, simple spiritual journeyer in the wilderness. Listen to it again, with this understanding.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to... John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Against all those titles, and all that formal language, we hear that the word of God came not to any of those power people, but to plain, old John, whose only title is "son of Zechariah" and whose only location is...the wilderness.

Who was this John and why did the word of God, why did the first word about the long awaited coming of the Messiah, come through him? Well, despite his lack of pedigree, John was still an interesting character to be sure. We are told that he wore only the simplest, rough hewn coverings, and that he ate only locusts and wild honey. This suggests that he was either a member of, or sympathetic to, the Essene sect within Judaism. You know, there were the pharisees, the legalists from the common people; the saducees, the priests from the upper crust, and the essenes: the ascetics who lived in the desert in spiritual community, holding all things in common, (sort of the hippie of their day) and seeking purification and spiritual growth through self denial. As one heavily influenced by the Essenes, John was probably also celibate,

and probably spent all his time in self renunciation in the desert, seeking spiritual growth. We are kind of talking the Hare Krishnas of the day...religious nuts whose only purpose was to grow spiritually, and who were willing to take the hard path to get there.

Why is this important? Well, for a couple reasons, only one of which I will belabor this morning. Since John is the one whose job it is to help us to prepare for the coming of Christ, I think there is something to the fact that he was all about personal spiritual discipline: personal renunciation of anything that held him back spiritually; living an austere and simple life so he could focus on God. As the one chosen by God to call us to prepare for Christ's coming, I think we would do well to follow, to some extent, some version of his example in terms of where we place our own, advent emphasis. And so this morning, let us consider this scripture: "In the two thousand and fifteenth year of the reign of President Obama, when Rick Scott was governor of Florida, and Brian Bagley-Bonner was the great high priest, and his Associate Pastor the High Priestess, in the region of Bradenton, at Faith United Church of Christ...the word of God came to... Marge, Janis, Joan, Donna, John, Denny, Richard....insert your name here" The voice of one crying in the wilderness "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

So what does it mean for each one of us, humble spiritual journeyers that we are, to prepare the way of the Lord? Well that is what I hope to look at this morning. And to begin, let's look at the other scriptures for the day. The prophet Malachi also sounds the theme of personal purification. In Malachi, God is likened to a refiner's fire, which burns away the dross or alloy in order to leave pure gold and silver. And in Philippians, we are told that God, who began a good work in us, will be faithful to complete it."

So just what is this work that God has begun in us? What's all this about dross being burned away to leave pure gold? What, exactly, is John calling us to do by way of preparation for the coming of the Lord? Well, to get at that, we have to go all the way back to the beginning of Genesis, where we are told first of all that we are created in the image and likeness of God, just a little lower than the angels...in other words, GOOD! strong, whole, quick spirited, love based,

and glorious! That's the truest truth about us human beings! That's how God created us in the beginning, and that truth runs deeper than anything else...However...then along comes the next part of that early story, where we are told that those earliest humans somehow gave in to something else as well. Our ancient Israelite brothers and sisters called it sin and represented it by the eating of the apple against God's specific command. Every religion and philosophy has a version of it...this new ingredient added to the human mix against which we struggle, this lower self...I kind of like the term "ego mind" adopted by contemporary meditation teachers. The name or terminologies don't matter so much, its the universal concept that somehow, in addition to the whole and glorious creatures that we were made to be, there is something else, a part that resists that. Some call it our lower self, or false self. At the end of Romans chapter 7, Paul does a marvelous job of describing this "feet of clay" part of our nature where he says, "why do I so often do what I don't intend to do, and not do the good I want to???" Boy, I can relate to that...this struggle between the part of me that is made in God's image, that loves the light, and genuinely wants to take the high road; and then this other part...this lower part of me that just wants what it wants when it wants it, and that chiefly wants to be left alone to run its own show.

The book that some of us are studying right now, called Living at God's Speed; Healing in God's Time says that for each of us, there is, in life, what the writer calls a "fundamental option." Charles Sidoti, the writer, says that each of us has a fundamental choice to make about the overall direction of our lives. Will you spend your life learning to love and serve, or will your life be all about getting what you want? In other words, which self will you feed...the higher or the lower? Perhaps you know the old Cherokee Legend about this. In it, an elderly grandfather is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy, "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is sick – he is envy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is whole and healthy– he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness,

benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one that you feed.”

Well, today, John the Baptist and Malachi and Paul are reminding us which wolf to feed. And Christianity takes it all a step farther and says that try as we might, we cannot haul our lower selves up all on our own. That we need God’s help. And one of the key ways God has helped us is to take the form of humanity, to become one of us...and God did that in Jesus. And when we walk with Jesus every day, he can help us, to choose which wolf to feed, and help give us the power to do it!

You see, Christ represents the totality of the healthy wolf. He is the prototype of the human who was made in God’s image and likeness, period. He is only higher self. God in the flesh. He overcame that ego mind , that lower self, once and for all, and now lives in a new and spiritual way to help us do the same, bit by bit, day by day, right in the midst of whatever desert we are living in. He is like a refiner’s fire, helping to burn away the dross of the sick wolf, helping to offload the complication and heaviness of the lower self so that we can rise to the whole, strong, magnificent, love-based life we were born for.

One of my favorite writers, CS Lewis, says this is the whole purpose of Christianity and church and really of human life in general. That each of us is on a journey to grow up and out of any of that lower wolf side, out of our lower or false self, and into Christ consciousness! Into the freedom and joy and glory of having been made in God’s image and likeness, just a little lower than the angels! Lewis says it is like we are being changed from little, toy people, like the toys children may play with in a doll house, into real men and women. Or, in another metaphor, he says,

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself...(Lewis continues) He says that by “putting on Christ” we will grow into his likeness and become “little g” god’s and goddesses: dazzling, radiant, immortal, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love that we cannot now imagine it. A bright, stainless mirror which reflects back perfectly God’s own power and goodness. The process will be long, and in part, very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less.

That’s what John the Baptist was working on in the wilderness. Its what he calls us to start anew at this time in each liturgical year by preparing for Christ’s coming. Its what the refiner’s fire is all about, and the good work that God began in us, and will be faithful to complete. Its about our God who accepts us as we are, but loves us too much to leave us that way.

So now to the real question this morning, one which only you can answer. Where does God want to be at work in your life? What dross does God want to purge away so that you can grow from the poor, feeble, lower self, from that sad, sick wolf, into the god or goddess you were created to be, and so that you can live from this new self, toward the healing of the world? Maybe it is something simple and fairly obvious, like an addiction or compulsion you need to deal with: maybe alcohol or food or workaholism or addiction to other peoples’ approval; maybe its a character trait that keeps tripping you up, like compulsive worry or repeatedly losing your temper, and try as you might, you seem unable to make headway and you need extra help! Maybe its more subtle and complicated, like being too attached to your own thoughts and

opinions, and you take them as reality instead of seeing that you have created your own mental universe with them and you can learn to spot them, but not be owned by them. Maybe you are somebody who perpetually lives ten feet ahead of yourself and just needs to learn to live in the moment which is really where God lives. Maybe you don't really know, and you need to figure out what your dross is, what's holding you back. Well, as my copastor said several times last week: my friend, then advent is for you. Its supposed to be a time of reflection and consideration of one's life in order to simplify and turn ourselves over to God in a new and deeper way. I believe that may be why God chose John to announce Christ's coming. We all need to take on our own version of locusts and wild honey- offloading the excess in order to see where God wants to purge away the lower self, the sick wolf, in favor of the higher one.

In one sense, it's also what communion is all about. Following the example Jesus set in dying to the lower self so that in Him we might rise up whole. (to communion table)