

“He Appeared in the Wilderness” / Matthew 3:1-11 / 8 December 2013

John-the-Baptist “appeared” in the wilderness. He just appeared there. And his message was this: “The kingdom of God is at hand. The world as you know it, the world as you live it, can change. A whole new world is waiting, longing, to break forth.” Have you ever known deep in your heart that you and this old world of ours were simply not on the same page? Have you ever told a joke that you thought was hilarious and obvious, and nobody got it? If you're a preacher, well, you know how that can feel. Have you ever made an observation or a statement assuming that you'd just come up with a small gem of wisdom or insight, but no one recognized your brilliant truth? It can be a lonely feeling when you look around and realize that this old world of ours is off doing its own thing, oblivious to whatever it is that you are thinking or feeling.

Have you ever stepped out of a hospital or a nursing home, for example, with a heavy heart and distracted thoughts, and all of a sudden it struck you as strange that the world had just kept right on doing its thing while you were inside, coping with your grief? City buses went screaming past as they've always done. Traffic was backed up, as usual, and sirens wailed, and street vendors sold flowers as if the world were well. Have you ever set foot out into the big world and noticed, to your shock and dismay, that none of the good people were about to stop and share in your heartbreak? And you wanted to say, “Hey, people of earth, how can you be driving cars at a time like this? Someone I care about is inside here, suffering.” Have you ever gotten off the phone after receiving terrible news, and your kitchen radio just kept on chattering about stocks and trading, and you thought, “Hey, come on! How can the world be concerned about the Dow Jones Industrial Average when I just found out that life as I've known it is no more?”

This past week, I ended up visiting a lot of people who are faring poorly. Some weeks just turn out that way. Whenever I feel dispirited, it's always my default position to seek shelter among the trees, like some kind of deer who's had a scrape with a Land Rover. And so, after leaving one sorrowful bedside, I sought out a quiet place that I know in the woods. It's one of the last wooded spots within two miles of the church, a pleasant hillside that overlooks the valley of Chartiers Creek. From up there, you can see the busy world passing by down below, but they can't see you. And in the seclusion of that peaceful spot, I looked out over the world and pondered life, and death, and that terrible place between the two, that place where no one should ever have to go, that place where I hope none of us will ever linger long. Down below me, in that busy valley, the world was going by as it's always done. On the opposite hillside, the trucks and cars went screaming past on the interstate—the same highway that screams endlessly behind my house, though I no longer notice its noise. All those vehicles were bound for other places. People down below were doing their Christmas shopping, going out to lunch, buying their cigarettes and their newspapers. It was the same old world it's always been, though I tried to imagine what it might have looked like when the valley walls were covered in forests, when the creek in the middle ran wild and free. I tried to imagine what it might have been like 200 years before. The beech trees, the hemlocks, the ferns stretching from my hillside all the way down to the creek, running pure and clear with trout and perch. And in my musing, it occurred to me that I couldn't see that other world, which is no more. I couldn't see past all the powerlines, and the asphalt, and the traffic. I tried to imagine a world where all the busy folks down there would stop for just a quick moment to show their respect for the person whose bedside I'd just left. But I couldn't see it. I couldn't quite picture a world where everyone would pause in all their hurrying, and scurrying, and speeding to consider that they are surely gliding past fellow human beings who stand in need. Someone is lonely. Someone else is hungry. Another person is incurably ill. Yet another person is beset with addiction and all the feelings of shame that come with it.

If everyone down there in the shopping plazas stopped and had a moment of silence, just out of respect for those who suffer, then no one would ever get anything done. The world would be speechless at all times. I couldn't see a world like that, as much as I might wish for it at times like those. It seemed unfair to me that I couldn't even see what was beyond the opposite valley wall.

There's probably nothing over there but housing developments, treeless residential streets with poetically British-sounding names, identical new homes, with identical lawns. And as different as all the people are in those unseen houses, their worries and their joys are largely the same. Someone I love is sick. Someone I love is far away. My spouse or my kid doesn't talk to me. My job is killing me. We, all of us, know from time to time that the world isn't supposed to be quite the way it is. We, all of us, sense deep within ourselves the wrongness of it all, and we usually only notice it when the world fails to feel the pain that we so deeply feel. But there on that hillside, in that moment of distraction, lost in my own feelings, old John-the-Baptist's cry came back to me: "The kingdom of God has drawn near. It's all around us. It is within us. It's on the other side of this valley, and it's right under my nose" Into our lonelier moments, just every once in a while, John the Baptist lifts his solitary voice, and his message reverberates down all these centuries of time, it echoes still from the banks of the Jordan to the banks of Chartiers Creek.: "A whole new world is waiting, yearning, crying out to be born, struggling to burst forth even from our sadness, and our busyness, and our boredom. It lingers all around us, usually unseen. And in its time, it will come."

John-the-Baptist is very definitely the Charles Bronson of the New Testament, the tough, grizzled loner who doesn't say much, but who means what he says. He always shows up at our Christmas preparations with a steely glint in his eyes, with his tangled beard and little bits of locust in his teeth. John-the-Baptist shows up out of nowhere. Say what you will about shepherds and angels; wax sentimental about the Magi, and the innkeeper, and the Star of Bethlehem: As far as historians are concerned, the story of Jesus begins with old John of the Desert, the wild-eyed, misfit prophet, who appeared out of nowhere, who stepped up onto a tall rock—his natural pulpit—and there sent out a cry that Jesus himself later took up: "The kingdom of God has come near. You with your iPhones and your Kitchen Aid Mixers! You with your mortgages, and your elections, and your complicated web of bittersweet relationships, your plans! You with your armies and empires! Look around you. Look within. This world is not as it is supposed to be. Your living is not as it was meant to be. But another world is waiting to be born."

We all like to believe that we're the good guys in this old world, that whatever rightness and wholeness there is in it—and there is much—we have a hand in all of that. At the pearly gates, a taxi driver and a minister were waiting in line. St. Peter consulted his list and said to the taxi driver, "Take this silk robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." St. Peter then greeted the minister saying, "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." "Just a minute," said the minister. "That man was a taxi driver, and he gets a silk robe and golden staff, while I get a cotton robe and wooden staff. How can this be?" St. Peter said, "Sorry, reverend, but up here, we judge people by how effectively they served our heavenly purposes. While you preached, people slept, but while he drove, people prayed." The old world casts its pall over our very best efforts. In our wisest moments, which unfortunately are sometimes our saddest, we know right well that things were meant to be other than what they are. We sense our own participation in the sorrows of a tired old world. Our old hearts come up with the same old schemes to make themselves happy. Our old imaginations return to the same handful of failed ideas. Our old memories replay the same destructive videos and soundtracks over and over. Our old attitudes keep getting us in trouble with the ones we love and with the ones we don't. It's an old world for all of us who must commute to work, and clean the house, and drop off prescriptions at the pharmacy. It's an old world for us who drop, exhausted, in front of the TV in the evening.

The world itself senses that it is somehow unreconciled to God, or the Universe, or Reality, or whatever it happens to believe in. This world tries to reconcile itself in myriads of ways. It tries religious rites and ceremonies to appease whatever deity might be dissatisfied with it. It tries charitable acts and kindnesses. It tries being spiritual but not religious. It tries to reconcile itself by vilifying others, by fighting for its varied causes, by earning and saving, or by partying and having fun. This old world feels somehow rejected by whatever Higher Power there might be out there, and it tries to

reconcile itself by being funny, or attractive, or fearsome and powerful. The mark of this old world is rejection, or the fear of it. Isn't it strange to think that, most of the time, when you meet with hostility in another person, whether a stranger or a family member, it is usually because that person has felt somehow rejected by you—whether rightly or wrongly—or expects to be rejected by you?

But John-the-Baptist stands on the outermost margins of the old world, and he declares that a new one is breaking in around us. That great German churchman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Paul Tillich, once famously summarized the Christian faith in this way: “We want only to communicate to you an experience we have had that here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves there is a New Creation, usually hidden, but sometimes manifest, and certainly manifest in Jesus who is called the Christ.”

If the old world is mostly about rejection, or the fear of it, then the new world is reconciliation with oneself and others and reconciliation with God. The only way to get from the old world to the new is to stop trying to reconcile yourself; stop trying to make yourself acceptable to the world, or to others, or to God. Simply accept the fact that you're not rejected; you're accepted. God doesn't reject you, but accepts you. Most of the world's people don't reject you. And you're utterly mistaken if you reject yourself. In the new world that is forever breaking in, you must accept not only others, but also yourself. The new world that John-the-Baptist announces, it enters through the cracks, like a bright light sending rays between the loose planks of an old wall. That new world seeps into the old world unseen. The new world doesn't make the old one go away, but the two exist alongside each other. And like so many things, the more you train your eye to see the appearance of that new and hopeful world right here in a broken old world, well, the more you see it all around you and within. And as our self-acceptance and our acceptance of others grows, then our acceptance of God grows, too, and we find ourselves living no longer in cycles of rejection but of reconciliation. This is the meaning of love.

Sometimes we feel out of step with this old world. When our humanity is most vulnerable, we feel the old world's inhumanity. When we are need, at times, we can feel this old world's miserliness; when we're lonely, we feel its unfriendliness. When we're poor, we feel its arrogant wealth. But still, just every once in a while, John the Baptist lifts his solitary voice, and his message echoes down the centuries from the banks of the Jordan to the very pew where you sit: “The kingdom of God has come near. A whole new world, a new creation, a new being is crying out to be born even from our sadness, and our busyness, and our boredom. It lingers all around us, usually unseen. It appears here and there. It comes now and again. It comes when its time is right.” Sometimes it appears out of nowhere, like John himself. Do you have ears to hear the Baptist's cry? Do you have eyes to see that new world that's forever being born? Amen.