

Are we still listening?

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Foster

December 12, 2004 Advent 3
Isaiah 35: 1-10, Matthew 11: 2-11

This is one of the most touching stories of the Bible. John the Baptist has spent his whole life talking about the coming of the Christ. Even before he was born, an angel told his mother that John would be special, that he would know of the Messiah and that it would be his job to announce his arrival.

And John put his whole heart and soul into it. He was the last of the OT prophets. He lived out in the wilderness and was known for his almost crazy devotion – people talked about him behind their hands.

- you know, John – he's the one who only wears camel's hair.
- Lives in the desert, looks like a wild man, with rawhide belt and wild hair
- Only eating locusts - grasshoppers! But with honey, as if that would make them taste any better.

John has done it all. He preached. He baptized. He warned. He announced. If he could have put up bill boards and driven around in a car with loudspeakers, he would have done that, too.

- all his energy went into telling people – the Messiah is coming
- get ready! Prepare! Listen to him!

And not surprisingly, John attracted a lot of attention.

And, like all good prophets –

- made some people nervous
- made some people angry
- And made a few enemies.

And now John is in jail. And he isn't so much scared, even though he knows that he is going to die, he's going to be beheaded.

But it is that time in someone's life, when they have to review. They have to look back and wonder

- have I used my life well?
- Has my life meant something?
- Have I made a difference?
- And for John, it's about more than – is the world a better place because of me. it's about – was I right?
- Have I spoken the truth
- Have I spent my energies, given my all, in the right direction?

So while he is on death row, sitting there in prison, he sends a message to Jesus. And he asks – are you the one? Are you the one we've been waiting for, talking about, hoping for?

Can I die knowing that I have seen the Messiah? Or will I die unfulfilled, have I been wasting my energies.

And Jesus sends him an answer. Tell John that

The blind receive their sight

The lame walk.

The lepers are cleansed.

The deaf hear.

The dead are raised.

The poor have good news brought to them.

All the things that Isaiah foretold, everything that he promised would happen, is happening now in front of your very eyes.

God is right here, right now.

I find it reassuring that John had to ask. Because you have to figure that if John didn't know. If John didn't recognize God come to earth in Jesus. If John didn't realize that his cousin, the one he baptized, was really "Emmanuel", God with us – then maybe there is hope for the rest of us.

Because we may not always see God, right in our midst.

Advent is a time to be waiting.

But we're not waiting for history.

Jesus has already been born.

We're not going back to Bethlehem.

We are not only interested in what God did, but also what God is doing.

Today.

And every day.

Because these words are so relevant, sometimes I can hardly believe that the ink is dry on the pages.

It says

The wilderness and dry land will be glad again.

This week I conducted 2 funerals. A funeral is like dry land. You come upon people who are feeling

- sad, like they are in a barren land
- wondering if they will ever feel happy again.
- Looking out and seeing only dryness, thinking surely it will never bloom here again. There will never be any laughing or joy any more
- Here in this desert of my life, that is where I will live

And in that situation, we are asked to be prophets. Talk about what God is saying, right now today.

- there will be hope
- there will be laughter
- there will be healing
- you may not feel that today, or even tomorrow
- but that is what good prophets can see – what will be. What is not yet, but surely can be.

At Advent and Christmas, we are celebrating not just what God has said in history, but also what God is saying right now.

The UCC has an ad campaign going on right now called “God is still speaking”. It’s been in the news a lot lately because 2 of the networks, CBS and NBC, refused to air the commercials because they thought they were too controversial.

- They didn’t ask my opinion, but I think some of their programming – Temptation Island, Wife Swapping, any of the soap operas – are a bit controversial

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Of course, since they refused to show the ads, the ads have been showed on all the news shows and played on the radio so that people can hear what it’s all about. so as a result, probably more people have seen the ads than would have otherwise.

The UCC was concerned that we have some really good churches going on, places where people could come to hear the good news, be welcomed into the presence of God. but no one knew about it.

So an ad campaign was dreamed up, first to introduce people to the UCC, then to say what the UCC stands for.

And the name of the campaign is called “God is still speaking”. It’s all about this idea that prophecies are still coming true. that, if we look, we can see God working in our midst. If we listen, we can hear God’s words.

It’s aimed at people who haven’t been to church for a long time, or maybe ever. Or who have been told that they weren’t welcome in church or couldn’t receive communion in the church.

That is who prophets always talk to. They talk to people who are down and out. They talk to people who need hope and help.

And don’t we know people like that?

- people who have been hurt by the church?
- People who have been overlooked or passed over
- People who don’t feel welcome
- People who have been told they can’t come to the table

- People who have actually been abused by the church

There are a lot of people who are angry at the church.
A lot of people who have been hurt by the church.
A lot of people who don't feel welcome in the church.

And so these ads try to talk to them.
It's important that they came out during Advent. It was intentional.

Right now, in this season when we celebrate that God is Emmanuel, living among us – can we hear what God is saying?

The ads reflect what the UCC believes God is saying to the people of our time. That God welcomes all people into his presence.

One of the ads is a little girl, saying the rhyme “here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people”. And then the next thing you see, is all different kinds of people – young, old, black, white, Hispanic, men, and women, saying the words, “all of the people”. Everyone is welcome in God's sight.

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That is what we try to say every Sunday. When we hear the assurance of pardon – God so loved the world, and all the people in it, that God gave his only son. That's Christmas. That's the good news.

It's for everyone in it. All the people.

it's a beautiful ad.

That of course isn't the one that got all the publicity.
The ad that has gotten all the news is known as the “bouncer”. There is a shot of a big stone church. And in front of it are 2 bouncers. They have a velvet rope in front of them, like you'd see at concerts, to keep people out.

- several people try to get in, but are turned away
- there is a black man, a Hispanic woman
- a person in a wheelchair
- there is also a gay couple. And that's what got all the news.
- the only ones who get in to the church are this picture perfect white family, with a father, mother, and 2 children.

And then the screen goes blank and it says – Jesus didn't turn any one away. Neither do we. We are the United Church of Christ.

Someone asked me if there are churches that literally have bouncers in front of them. Not that I know of.

But probably a lot of us Protestants have been to a Catholic church and told we couldn't receive communion. That we weren't welcome at that table.

And certainly there are churches that are not as welcoming to all kinds of people as others.

The question always is – what do we think God is saying to us, right now?

Advent is a reminder to listen for God's voice.

But we do want to be careful.

Because prophecy is a slippery thing.

The confusion comes when one person says – God is still speaking, and this is what God is saying. I know for sure that this is God's will.

And the next person says. I agree with you, God is still speaking, but I think God is saying something completely different. I'm listening for God's voice and I'm hearing something else.

And that is when it is time to talk.

It is time for those different opinions, ideas, theologies to sit down together and take the time to talk and listen to one another.

The conversation isn't over yet.

God is still speaking to God's people.

And the people of God need to keep speaking to each other.

This is good news for God's people.

When we are like John and feel imprisoned, locked up

- by fear
- by anger
- by doubt
- by sadness

we want to be listening for the words of hope that are coming.

Maybe there will be times when we will be the messenger.

And we'll get to say

Rejoice!

For the blind can see, the deaf can hear, the lame can walk, and poor people have good news brought to them.

Surely God is right here, with us.