

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2008

(Third in Advent)

SCRIPTURES: Isaiah 61:1-4; John 1:6-28

“Out of the Morning Mist”

I don't know what prompted me, poorly bundled as I was, to wander down into the pre-dawn fog that blanketed the hollow behind our house; a fog that looked like the fibrous batting that Jenny sews into the center of her quilts. Maybe it was the fact that after trudging up our long drive I had found, as is often the case, that the morning newspaper had not yet arrived, an occasion that never brings great pleasure. Maybe it was an extension of the deep melancholy that has enveloped me for some weeks now, as I seem to be working far too much and enjoying myself less than I should be, grieving the health concerns that challenge my father and the fact that I can't be of more help and support to my parents, feeling off center and out of sync as Bridget and I strive to cover for each other as she faces her own family challenges. Maybe the whole chaotic mess of our world has simply seeped into my soul and the frightful yammering of a media that finds words of comfort and hope not nearly sensational enough has started to pull me down into the mire of pettiness and unfound worry. Maybe it was just my fascination with the fact that fog can be so specific in how it places itself across a landscape, leaving some points deeply shrouded while, just stone's throw away, there is relative clear.

I moved gingerly across what had once been the verdant mantle of towering trees, now cast to the ground and dusted with winter's frost; although there was no blanket of snow upon the earth yet this season, treading down to the stream at the edge of our property and then to the strange little pond that lies down in the depths of the hollow and in the midst of the marsh. I was thinking that I might pause there for a bit in whiteness of the fog and gather my thoughts in the amazing silence of that place, a silence broken only by the occasional flit and rustle of God's creatures and the distant rumble of our own fantastic flying machines as they soar in and out of Bradley Field.

My reverie was shattered though by the realization that I not was alone in my place of refuge, that there was another human form there, appearing almost as a ghost out of the morning mist, coming toward me from the distant end of the pond. At first I thought him to be one of my neighbors, possibly Mr. Dixon who loves to string lights and clear little trails, as intent upon making his part of the wood as accessible as I am at leaving mine wild and natural. But as he approached I came to the full knowledge that this man was no neighbor, that he was indeed a

total stranger, though there was something vaguely familiar about him that prickled and poked at the depths of my memory. A smallish, slight man, he was dressed in a way that seemed totally out of style, yet which would not attract undue attention on a city sidewalk. He paused some distance from me and, giving just a hint of a quirky bow, addressed me directly and by name!

Deeply shocked, I asked of him, “Who are you and how do you know me?” “Well” he said as he stepped a bit closer, “I’m surely not the Messiah and my name is not Elijah. I am not the prophet nor even a prophet as most would hope a prophet to be. “Then who are you?” I begged, adding without really knowing why, “Let me have an answer for myself and for those who rely upon me to discover such things.” He said “I am the voice that cries out in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of our Lord!’ Every season, every time, every place has its own wilderness Dan, as you are experiencing now; preparing for a season of joy when your heart has little joy in it, striving to grant those around you a glimpse of the light even as you are often shrouded in darkness and weighed heavy with care. Do not be afraid Dan.”

I took a step backwards, almost stumbling on an errant root and betraying the caution that I did not wish to betray, asking, “Do I have something to fear?” “What you fear” said he, “is that the madness that you perceive in me may well be a madness that resides in you. And no, you need not fear that nor anything else that is within you nor anything about you for God is with you.”

And again without knowing or even questioning the source of my words, I asked, “If you are the one crying in wilderness, then what does your presence here make me?” The man’s face brightened. He smiled broadly, cocked an eyebrow and answered, “A perceptive fellow you are! I believe that makes you an accomplice!” Was it the chill of the morning seeping through the layered warmth of my outfit, or rather the words that he offered that made me shiver?

“Cry out!” he said to me, “Cry out from your wilderness! Cry out from the wilderness that you share with others! Cry out in the midst of the wilderness that weaves itself through all creation; the wilderness that is stress and fatigue and doubt and shame, the wilderness that is despair and grief over the loss of anything and everything that once was and is no more. Cry out with hope that has no visible basis in anything that surrounds you, but that has a rock solid foundation in everything that lives within you Dan. Tell those about you, in intimate and personal conversations and in rooftop shouts to the masses, that the kingdom of God is near; so near that if you were to still yourself enough you can feel the brush of it against your cheek. Tell

those about you that Christ has come and that Christ will come again, and that there is no time like the present to prepare their hearts and souls for that coming. Tell those about you that no one need fear; that in some small and mysterious way the defining words of God are ‘fear not’; words that have been spoken by messengers over and over again to ears that are often closed to hearing what wondrous words they are. Tell them that even in the darkest depths of the night the light of dawn is there, sometimes not yet visible or present where they stand but always steadily moving toward them. And tell them that they are never alone; that when they will least expect it someone will step out of the gathering gloom and point the way. Tell them Dan!”

And with that, this strange little man whose name I now knew very well turned and stepped quickly back into the mist, his frail form fading quickly into a distance brought near by the closeness of the fog. And as my attention focused again upon my greater surroundings I realized that indeed the dawning light had broken over the distant hillside and was painting the highest branches of the wood above me a sparkling gold, forcing the mists that surrounded me to retreat deeper and deeper into the depths of the hollow until there would be no place at all for them to hide.

(pause)

Now you may wonder whether this tale that I have just told is one of historical fact or instead the telling of a vision of the Holy Spirit. Is it possible that what you have heard is simply a fanciful fiction woven by your pastor for your entertainment . . . or could it even be the product of a madness that is within me? My verbal response to such wonderings is this, “I will not tell you.” And it is entirely possible that I am not completely sure myself! What I will say is this; that in the deepest Biblical and theological sense this tale is truth, truth as I have come to know truth, truth as best I am able share it. It is my hope that you will receive it as such; that you will gather your own truths in the midst of your own wilderness, and that you will join me in sharing the good news that is ever before us: “Christ has come; Christ will come again; the Kingdom of God is at hand; make straight the way of the Lord!”

Amen.