

ADVENT 2

Year C

*This sermon was written by **the Rt. Rev. Deon Johnson** for Advent 2 (C) in 2018, when he served as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brighton, Mich.*

During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2024* at www.sermonsthatwork.org

Who Needs a Prophet?

Baruch 5:1-9 or Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 4 or 16; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

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. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Who needs a prophet anyway? Prophets have an annoying habit of pointing out our flaws, airing family secrets, and being all around nuisances. They love to call us out when we stray from God and when we have lost sight of truth. At best, they are a nuisance; at worst, they are meddling. Who needs these messengers of discomfort and sacrifice? What are they good for? Wouldn't it be best for them to get on their soap boxes and

protest and preach and prognosticate somewhere, anywhere else but here?

It is hard enough trying to be a good upright, churchgoing, tithing-giving, Sunday school-teaching person without one of these annoying prophets calling us to care for the poor, to look out for the downtrodden, to seek after justice and righteousness. Don't we do enough already?

It would be nice if they would go bother the people in power, the people who can actually do something for the poor and the needy. Why do these prophets insist on bothering good people? But here they are, calling us once again to repentance, and forgiveness, and hope. You would think that they were broken records, spinning the same thing over and over and over again.

Here comes another one called John, son of Zechariah—John the Baptist, some call him. He's no ordinary prophet; he doesn't just preach that we need to repent, but he has the nerve to insist that people get baptized in the muddy River Jordan no less. It would be nice if John sang a different tune for a change. He is always running around, "Repent this! Prepare that!" Haven't we heard this message before? And yet he persists. Like crazy old Isaiah preaching about paths being made straight, and valleys and mountains being filled and made flat. The thing about straightening crooked places and valleys being filled and mountains being brought low is that we like our paths crooked, our valleys deep, and our mountains high. We like things the way they are and the way they have always been.

Who needs a prophet anyway?

We need prophets. The people who sit in darkness, in deep despair, they need prophets. The people who look around and see destruction and desolation, they need prophets. The people who have no voice, no rights, no hope—they need prophets, because prophets proclaim a new and better way. Prophets are truth-tellers to a world longing and praying and looking for glimpses of hope.

Our world needs prophets. Prophets are harbingers of hope and hope is found in the one whose coming we await. The message foretold by John breaks into our world with deafening silence and shatters the dark of despair with the light of love.

Who needs prophets? We need prophets. We need those annoying, nagging nuisances that call us to be better followers of Jesus. As Rachel Held Evans reminds us, “Biblically speaking, a prophet isn’t a fortune-teller or soothsayer who predicts the future, but rather a truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.”

We need the voice of one crying out in the wilderness because things happen in the wilderness. In the wilderness, the needs are raw and real, and sweet words and hollow sentiment are not enough. We need prophets especially when we have grown so full of ourselves that we neglect to see the orphan, the refugee, the migrant, the widow, and the stranger. We need prophets to call us back to God, back to a place where hope is found not only in church, but in the world around us—in the interaction of strangers, the joys of difference, and in the radicalness of love.

Like Jesus and John, we are tasked with holding lightly to the things that do not matter, in order to be open to a hope-filled future to which God calls us. Now more than ever, our communities, our nation, and our world are in desperate need of the glimmer of hope found in Jesus Christ. Now more than ever, we need to not only hear

the cries of the prophets, but to take on the mantle of the prophets.

We, as the church, the people of God, the followers of Jesus, are called to claim our prophetic birthright and be the voice of the voiceless, the hope of the hopeless, the love of the loveless.

Often in the church, we can feel small and powerless, wondering how we will survive, being concerned about ourselves rather than those in need. But God’s prophetic grace often falls not on the powerful or the mighty, but on extraordinarily ordinary people who turn the world right-side-up. We are called to remember that we are not a group of people who believe all the same things; we are a group of people caught up in God’s plan of redemption and salvation with Jesus in the center.

The question facing us as Christians, who seek to follow where Jesus leads and to heed the call of John, isn’t “Do we need prophets?” The question we must answer is “Are we willing to be prophets?” Are we willing to let God’s light shine through us so much so that we can show the world a new and better way? Are we willing to be prophetic enough to walk out in faith and break bread with people who may not look like us, or talk like us, or vote like us or speak like us? Because that is the Good News that we have to share; that is the prophetic vision that has the power to transform our world.

There are prophets in our midst. There is one sitting next to you right now. Look around. Listen. Keep awake. There is still darkness and despair and shattered dreams. There are still sins to be forgiven and enemies to turn into friends. It may not look like it, it may not sound like it, it may not feel like it, but in Jesus Christ, love has already won. The light of love and the glimmer of hope has broken through the gloom. The crooked places have been made straight, the valleys and mountains made smooth, the rough places made plain. Look and you will see the salvation of our God breaking through in a thousand pinpricks of light.

So, tune your ears to the voices crying from the wilderness, pay attention to the weirdos who speak of Good News and forgiveness and repentance and hope. Be the prophet who points to Jesus coming once more into our world. Amen.

Prompts

Bishop Johnson discusses how prophets can be “annoying” truth-tellers who often challenge us to live more fully into our faith. Reflect on a time when you felt challenged by someone to live more justly or compassionately. What was the outcome? How did this challenge impact your understanding of faith?

The sermon reminds us that “love has already won.” How does this hopeful vision influence your own life?