

Wild Words

Sermon by Leah Fowler

December 4, 2016

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

I try not to pull out gimmicks with kids. But when I saw in a quick internet search that I could find grasshoppers-- close cousins to locusts-- at a Mexican restaurant in the East Village, I could not resist using these for the Children's Sermon. It is biblical, after all. And just as God gave the prophet Ezekiel a scroll to eat, which empowered him then to prophesy God's word, I hope that by eating a few of the kinds of bugs John the Baptist ate will give me the kind of voice John spoke 2,000 years ago.

But maybe that is not a voice people want to hear. To many, John's words are about as palatable as the mouthful of grasshoppers he eats. John comes from the wilderness, which means he was living outside the jurisdiction of Rome. He was living off the land, eating foods provided by the earth that he did not have to buy-- much like the Hebrews did while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, learning to rely on God. "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near!" Rather than receiving these words for ourselves and our own lives, we want to look over our shoulder to see who John must have been talking to: in the pew behind us; the people who voted the wrong way; the Sadducees and Pharisees, people who lived in another millennium. In this church and in others I have served, I have heard from some people how much they do not like going through the Prayer of Confession. For some, there is legitimate scarring from previous religious experience in churches that assured followers that they are dirt, worthy of only fire and brimstone, and if not for Jesus taking one for the team by dying on the cross, God would have really given it to them. They see the Prayer of Confession and think they are being shamed again.

Others really believe they are above it all. They may read each line of the confessions and checked their clean conscience with each statement: “Nope, not me! Guess this one must have been written for the other deplorables in the room. Let’s pass the peace!”

And yet, our church’s lectionary gives this message to us today, as we prepare the way for the Christ child to be born. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Have you ever looked in a mirror’s reflection of another mirror? Do you see the infinite reflection, a mirror image of a mirror image of a mirror image of a mirror image? As we read John, who tells us to repent, he reflects the words of Isaiah, who tells us “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” The Greek word for repent, *metanoia*, implies a changing of mind and of life. It is a call that gets repeated through the bible through prophets, priests and patriarchs.

Lillian Daniel notes, “It is not coincidence that Jesus said both ‘Love your neighbor’ and ‘Love your enemy’ because often they are the same person.”

<sup>1</sup> I often wonder that about the Sadducees and Pharisees, who often play the foil to what Jesus is trying to teach, but are always hovering about in Jesus’ inner circle. And before Jesus even enters the scene, these guys are showing up for John’s baptism. It is not clear whether they actually want to be baptized, or if they are just watching to see if he is doing it right, if he is holding to the tradition which probably resembles the practice of Mikvah, a sacred bath for ritual cleansing that was outlined in the Torah. John tells them that who they came from does not matter; the fact that they are ancestors of Abraham does not matter. Abraham, whose offspring bear the covenant that God made with Abraham, that his children will be as numerous as the stars in the sky; Sarah, who laughed when she overheard an angel tell Abraham that he will bear a son through her-- what, should I share pleasure again with my husband in this old age? Well, through her, a shoot grew out of what was thought to be a stump, the dead end to their fertility. Pretty amazing what God can do, huh?

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Daniel, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers*

What matters most is not the soil a person comes from, but the fruit that person bears.<sup>2</sup> John demands that we not just rest on the laurels or privilege of our ancestors, but that we expect *more* of the world as we participate in the future God wants to build for us. So you are impressed by what the ancestors did? God could do it all over again, just from these very stones lying around on the ground. Instead of just looking back, look at yourself and ask “What can I do, today?”

Just when we accept the inevitability of winter and the death of all new growth, we talk of new shoots springing up. African American women have a traditional saying of how they, and their foremothers, “make a way out of no way.” No money. No support. No rights. And yet, look at the ordinary and remarkable women who have prevailed against all odds to stretch the dollar, raise their families, escape to freedom, create amazing art, and contribute to the building of a nation, while also offering the important voice of resistance. Because there was first Harriet Tubman; Sojourner Truth; Rosa Parks; Nina Simone; Angela Davis; Alice Walker and Michelle Alexander, Michelle Obama can be the phenomenal woman she is.

I am not a black woman, but I have been awed by the stories of what women like those I just mentioned have been able to accomplish despite being on the margins of those typically granted privilege in society. While it is tempting for me to sit on my sofa with sighs too deep for words as I look at the state of our country and fear for the rollback in civil rights, I know I cannot afford that indulgence. The kingdom of heaven has come near, as John the Baptist has said. I must be ready to bear good fruit, lest the ax fall on me. I must not look at the stump and assume it is a dead end. Something green must grow from this.

The Talmud has a saying, that “every blade of grass has an angel that bends over it and whispers, ‘Grow, grow!’” When I go to family gatherings,

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Allen, “The Politics of Descriptions” from *Political Theology Today* (blog) Nov. 28, 2016

I am now that Auntie who squeals over her nieces and nephews and says, "Look at how much you have grown!" The angels have certainly been whispering over these children, just as they whispered over me and caused me to grow when I was a girl. Isaiah says that a little child shall lead us into that peaceful metanoia-- changing of minds and of lives-- that God wants for us. A child shall show us the world where the wolf will live with the lamb, the world where none will hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain. As I consider the future for my own daughter, I am heartened by the relentless commitment of those younger than me to set the world right again. As we await the Christ child, we open ourselves to the possibility that the kind of power that can change the world can come in the weakest possible form.

Some cultures eat bugs as a regular part of their diet, you know. I have eaten chocolate covered ants in France, grubs in Zimbabwe, and fried crickets in China. They are a terrific and abundant source of protein, and consuming them has minimal impact on the environment. Food scientists tell us we may need to rely more on bugs in our future as a sustainable source of food. Maybe John's ideas aren't so wild after all. And besides, along with the bugs John ate, he had honey to go with it which would have soothed the tongue after the sharp prickle of bug legs. Honey reminds us of the sweet grace of a God who, generation after generation, has sought the lost, redeemed the wretched, and promised peace to the weary. Today, we look in the mirror and see that sweet history repeated and reflected. And we look toward tomorrow to see how it will be born in us, anew. Thanks be to God. Amen.