

Third Sunday of Advent B

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

“In a move to "promote greater unity" among its body and the Pike County community it serves, a small Kentucky church voted to ban interracial couples from membership and from participating in certain worship activities.”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/30/interracial-couple-banned-from-kentucky-church_n_1121582.html?view=screen

“The Nigerian senate has passed a bill banning same-sex marriages, defying a threat from Britain to withhold aid from nations violating gay rights.

The bill by Africa's most populous nation calls for a 14-year sentence for anyone convicted of homosexuality. Anyone who aids or "abets" same-sex unions faces 10 years in prison.”

http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/30/world/africa/africa-gay-rights/index.html?hpt=hp_t3

“Gunshots were reported near a parking lot on the Virginia Tech campus on Thursday, according to a [Twitter alert](#) issued by the school.

The suspect has [reportedly](#) a "white male, gray sweat pants, gray hat w/neon green brim, maroon hoodie and backpack." The campus has been put on lockdown.”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/08/virginia-tech-shooting_n_1136934.html?ref=crime&ir=Crime

“Muskegon Heights school officials will ask the state to appoint an emergency financial manager to take over operations of the district after Superintendent Dana Bryant retires at the end of this month.”

http://www.mlive.com/news/muskegon/index.ssf/2011/12/muskegon_heights_schools_asks.html

These are just a few of the headlines I came across this week as I browsed through the news. I sat in silence after I read each one. Reading news like this is a struggle. These headlines constantly remind me that we live in a broken world.

Kenneth G Ranos - First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Muskegon, MI – Advent 3B– 12/10-11/2011

I wish I could say that these headlines were unusual, exceptional, or otherwise not somehow representative of the state of our world. But you know it as well as I do. For all of the good in the world, there is more hatred, violence, bigotry, and death in this world than we know what to do with.

Maybe that's why I like Advent so much.

Two weeks ago I said that Advent is not so much about waiting for the birth of Christ as it is waiting for God to come among us again. Well, after reading these headlines, it is obvious that we live in a world that needs God again.

The reason I love Advent so much, just like I love Epiphany, and Easter, and All Saints Day, is because Advent is a season of hope. Everything about this season, from the snow on the ground to the blue decorations, speaks of hope. It's everywhere.

I know that the general perception of the Old Testament among Lutherans is not very good. We read the Old Testament and all we seem to see is an angry God.

How quickly we forget about people like Third Isaiah, who proclaimed:

“The spirit of the LORD God is upon me,
because the LORD has annointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners.”

Or jump ahead to the Gospel reading, and the peculiar radical character named John the Baptist.

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” he cries.

“Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

In a broken world, God provides voices of hope. Whether Isaiah or John, God's message rings out loud and clear: You are not forgotten.

In today's world, we could use a few more of these voices—people like Isaiah, and like John.

John comes from nowhere. He is not grounded in a specific place. His identity is not tied to his birthplace, his home, his country or nationality.

When the temple authorities ask him, “Who are you?”, his answer is ... appropriate, and important. He identifies himself not as a prophet, or Elijah, or even as John.

He identifies himself only as a “voice”. Voices have but one function, one duty, one purpose: to speak, to proclaim. To be heard. To give a message.

In John, I see a model for the church in the world. But it is a model we have not always done a good job of imitating.

John knew his purpose. He knew that he was not the Messiah, not the one through whom the world would be saved. When he is asked, “Who are you?”, that's the first thing he says—sorry, I'm not who think I am.

The church at times has tried to present itself as the salvation of the world, the vehicle through which God will redeem the world.

Remember John.

It is actually a great relief to me that the church is NOT the salvation of the world. That is a duty, a responsibility that is way above my ability. I take comfort in the fact that it is not up to me to save the world.

John points to the one who will come after him, Jesus the Christ. In the same way, Advent points to the one to come, Jesus the Christ, who will come again as savior of the world.

It is not up to the church to save the world. But it is up to the church to be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord.”

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We as part of the church have an incredible opportunity in front of us. The church is unique in the world in that it defies all boxes and all categories. The Gospel is the Gospel whether it is preached in a pulpit or on a boat, in America or in India, by men or women, whether its proclamation is authorized or illegal.

The Gospel exists without the help of and in spite of human authorities or lines.

We are voices of the wilderness bringing a message of hope. We are voices upon whom the holy spirit has come. In our baptisms we were anointed for this call:

Not to save the world or to fix it. But to bring a message of hope and comfort. A call to change and a call to challenge, but ultimately, a call of proclamation and announcement.

There is one coming who is greater than all of us. Even John was unworthy to untie his sandal. We don't need to worry about being heroes.

For all of our instant communication, we live in an age of injustice met with silence. All we need to do to break it, is to speak.