

Divine Wisdom from the Lunatic Fringe

Malachi 3:1–4

Luke 3:1–6

December 6, 2009

In the movie *Life or Something Like It* (2002), every day at the corner of Fourth and Sanders in downtown Seattle, Prophet Jack scrambled onto his crate, dramatically thrust his arms into the air, arched his back, threw back his head, gazed into the sky, and then prophesied, “I see and I say.”

One day, television reporter Lanie Kerrigan talked with Jack and received a disturbing message. Prophet Jack prophesied that the Seahawks would beat the Broncos by 6 points, that it would hail the next day, and that on the following Thursday... Lanie would die. She dismissed Jack as outrageously loony until she was awakened in the night by a hail storm.

You see, for Lanie everything had been going according to her plan up to that point – she had great friends, a great boyfriend, a great job with the possibility of a promotion into her dream job. She told one of her friends, “I can honestly say, my life is perfect.”

But when Jack's first two prophecies come true, she begins thinking about life, and what's truly meaningful. A friend offers a word of hope, “If you change the path you're currently on, the outcome's going to be different.” She replies with, “But I've worked so hard on this one.” Isn't that how most of us feel about our lives before we know Jesus?! But God has a better plan for our life in mind.

Actually, Jack is not a bad imitation of a biblical prophet in that he challenges Lanie to consider the direction of her life. Dan Clendenin writes, the biblical prophets *see* with unusual clarity the significance of current events or the circumstances of God's people, and then based upon their diagnosis they *say* a word from God to provoke His people to change. They do more "forth-telling" about the present than "fore-telling" about the future, more prognosis than prediction. Prophets connect God's word with our world, explaining each to the other. Sometimes they deliver a word of rebuke, at other times a word of social, political, economic, or religious analysis, and often times a word of hope and encouragement.

God in his unflinching mercy always pursues His people, and sometimes He uses prophets to reach them. He is the gracious “hound of heaven” who does not stand by idly and let His people flounder. Unfortunately, prophets are generally not called from the family of the king or the president. They are not generally priests or bishops. They are ordinary folk who, once they begin to speak on behalf of God, are sometimes seen as being on the lunatic fringe.

John the Baptist is one of those kinds of folks. His daddy was of the priestly class, but John chose not to go into the family business. Instead he answered a call from God to go into the wilderness and speak a word to the people.

John was called by a God who hears the cry of the people, knows the longing of their hearts, and responds to their need. And, just like the prophets of old, John is the messenger who carries God's message to the people. Once again, God was breaking into the life of His people.

Things will no longer be as they were, and this will come as quite a shock to some, because they liked things just as they were. John did not call the people to be faithful to the Law. He called them to recognize that they were sinners, and to repent.

What was the meaning of John's message? He warns Israel about God's judgment and promises God's salvation. Both the warning and the promise are conditional. They depend upon the free response of the people of Israel. John's message of both warning and promise is meant to persuade the people to change or repent.

There is good news here, for those who will listen. Learning that you are a sinner can be part of the good news. It means knowing what the problem is; knowing there is a God whom you have offended and to whom you can be reconciled. In addition, you and I hear the words of the prophet from our vantage point on this side of the resurrection. As we listen today during this season of Advent, we know that there is a Savior coming – one in whom we can place our faith and one who will complete the work our repentance begins.

This morning, as you come to receive Holy Communion, perhaps it would be a good time to repent anew and turn your life over more fully to Christ. Now, you may think of repentance as a great, life-changing action, but William Herzog notes in his writing that the Greek word we usually translate *repentance*, *metanoia*, can refer to a *small* change in one's mind or life. If one projects a small change over a long-enough time, then a small change can become a life-altering event. *Metanoia* is something like the mid-course corrections that were part of the Apollo space program. The space capsule would burn its rockets only a few seconds, but the course change was immensely significant.

Hear the good news delivered from the lunatic fringe – from the man who lived in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey – and give God praise for the coming of the One who is sent to save us.