

**Jon Hauerwas – December 9, 2018 – “Making the Time”
Philippians 1:3-11 and Luke 3:1-6**

Yesterday, I took my oldest son ice-skating at Lock 3. One of the first people who greeted us there was our former crossing guard at King School. A towering man with a big smile, Jermaine now wears a uniform declaring that he is an ambassador for our city. In short, his job is to assist visitors while making downtown feel more accessible and friendly. As Jermaine and I exchanged pleasantries, a man standing to my right assumed that I must be a local, struck up a conversation with me, and said that he was not from around here.

“Where are you from?” I asked him.

“Carrollton,” he told me.

“Oh, yeah, where’s that?” I continued.

“It’s an hour and a half from here,” he replied.

“Wow. What brings you to Akron?” I asked.

“Well,” he continued, “I heard about how great Lock 3 is, so I drove my children here to be a part of it.”

I was stunned and excited. “That’s great,” I told him. “I’m glad that you could make it.”

According to online resources, Carrollton, Ohio is a town of less than 4,000 people, located southeast of Canton. In my mind, it's a town that could just as easily be called Nazareth or Bethlehem – out of sight and out of mind for vast swaths of the greater population. I began to imagine the rural landscape around that village as a metaphorical wilderness - a great unknown to most.

Recalling scripture, you may remember that while “God spoke to the rulers and kings of Israel and other nations; even in Israel, God’s preferred recipients of divine address were the prophets.” Most of these lived who lived among the common people or at the edge of society. ¹ Yes. Lest we become overly self-absorbed, we are wise to remember that John the Baptist is to be found not “in the urban centers of power, but in the wilderness, a space where power and privilege associated with [government officials] and their appointees have little currency and their pronouncements enjoy little cachet.” In our second lesson today, God’s word comes, not to rulers, not even to ruling priests, but to John, a wilderness prophet.” ²

As we consider our text for today, I invite you to ponder the world as it stands in 2018. Have you ever noticed that the rulers of this world often act as if there is no

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Second Sunday of Advent, Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Year C, Volume 1, Ed. Joel B. Green. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2018), 30.

² Joel B. Green, *Second Sunday of Advent, Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Year C, Volume 1, Ed. Joel B. Green. (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2018), 29.

new word to hear? Perhaps, having conceived that they are truly enacting all that is good and right, the powerful are undeterred by every form of criticism and continue to plug away, full steam ahead, with their own agendas. But, if this is the way of the powerful, then take a closer look at the contrast that John offers.

John, this “prophet in the wilderness... knows that he lives in the vulnerability of reception, waiting to hear God’s word and looking and listening to the land for his daily sustenance.”³ The wilderness, in other words, is the place where John prepares “to hear the word that God will give, not one that he will contrive.” I’ll say that again. The wilderness is the place where John prepares to hear the word that God will give, not one that he will contrive. And, friends, if we are willing to admit it, the word of God often comes to us in much the same manner – “in such places and times of vulnerable reception, when we are ready to hear what God will say.”⁴

Here, I want to tell you a story. Some years ago, there was a young, Presbyterian missionary named Eliza Agnew who was serving as a teacher in Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka. Her life was full of promise. She enjoyed the work to which she was called and she was soon to be married to the man whom she adored.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

Their plan was rather straightforward: they would wed in the United States and then return to the mission field where Eliza was serving.⁵

However, as the date of their celebration drew near, Eliza's fiancé got cold feet. Like so many of us, he enjoyed his life in the West. He had grown comfortable with the many advantages of our society, and he did not want to live a life of poverty. With his passion waning for the original plan, he determined that he did not want to return to the mission field, and he told Eliza that she ought to cancel her return trip to Ceylon.⁶

The couple talked, and they argued, and they talked some more. Still, Eliza was undeterred. She told her beloved that she felt called by God to do this, and that there was no turning back. In response, her fiancé proclaimed that he would refuse to marry her if she would not cease her mission efforts. And, then, at the end of one heated exchange, he shouted at her, "You are going to give your whole life to a bunch of people who will not even remember your name. You are a fool."⁷

⁵ Marj Carpenter, "How Do You Lead in the Church?" (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2000).

⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁷ *Ibid.*,

The couple parted ways. Eliza returned to Ceylon where she dedicated her life to the service of Jesus Christ and to teaching. And, you know what, her former fiancé was wrong. That young missionary was no fool. Decades later, and at the time of her death, nearly every Christian girl who could read or write in that land had received either a first or middle name of Eliza.⁸

For what will we be remembered? For following our own paths or for pursuing the will of God? Yes. What are we willing to give up? And what must we continue to hold dear? A voice cries out in the wilderness, “I may come to your city for economic, or civic, or cultural ends, but I will go back to the wilderness to hear the voice of God. And when I get there, far from all of the noise and distractions, I will invite you to journey with me, to be baptized, and to see where the path will lead you. Make the time. Prepare the way. The King of Glory is coming. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ *Ibid.*,