

Luke 3:1-6
December 6, 2015

Hope in the Wilderness

Susan J. Barnes
St. John's, Minneapolis

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, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 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. 5 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; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

The Word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness...

Many in Minneapolis were shocked In 2011 when our city was ranked No. 1 in racial inequity in the United States--specifically the disparity between black and white unemployment rates. Addressing racial inequity has been a priority for Mayor Hodges and the current City Council. But it's complicated. The issues aren't the same for immigrant populations--like Somalis and Hmong--and the African-Americans who have long been here.

Those historic citizens have been in the spotlight since the death of Jamar Clark three weeks ago and the racist shooting of five of the demonstrators. The volatile situation that injustice has created on the Northside of our city is inescapably clear. Systemic, persistent racial, religious, cultural discrimination there was created by human will--through prejudiced policies and actions going back generations. This generation has maintained those systemic barriers to equal opportunity--actively and passively.

Dear ones, God is calling us--loud and clear, here and now--to recognize and redress the social, economic, political oppression of African Americans in own city--and the devastating effect it has on our own souls.

God is calling us to repentance for the forgiveness of sins past and present.

Discrimination against blacks and Jews in housing was customary here. Then, in 1934, the Federal Housing Administration created (and banks quickly followed) the racist policy that defined where mortgages would be granted or not in cities all over America. For example: a 1935 map of Minneapolis labeled "Negro slums" the Harrison neighborhood in near North, just west of downtown, while Kenwood, a couple of miles south of Harrison, was labeled "The Gold Coast".

The Northside was outlined in red--hence the term "redlining". That meant folks living there, Jews and people of color, were denied mortgages. They were deprived of the security of home ownership. And they were left out of the great post-war growth in home equity that helped lift millions into the middle class. Our Jewish friends pulled up stakes and were welcomed into the suburbs. In their wake, African-Americans increasingly filled the vacancies on the Northside.

LBJ's Fair Housing Act became **law** in 1968, but the racist **practice** of redlining went on. A 2014 study by Myron Orfield, Director of the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity at the U of M's

Law School showed that **irrespective of their means**, minority applicants were still disproportionately denied mortgages, and that they were more often given sub-prime loans in the last bubble.

Our own, present-day sins include allowing this to continue, accepting it as the status quo. We have perpetuated the redlining--socially, economically, educationally--by treating the Northside as off-limits, terra incognita, a place of danger. A friend my age who grew up in this neighborhood said her parents fearfully forbid her to go to the Northside.

Fear breeds fear. Distrust breeds distrust. Fear, distrust and ignorance of the other divide us further and further. We all suffer from that separation from our sisters and brothers.

John the Baptist called people to repentance for forgiveness of sins. The Greek word translated "forgiveness" is *aphesis*. Jesus used the same word twice in Luke 4, as NT professor Judith Jones noted. You recall the famous scene: Jesus comes from the wilderness to his hometown synagogue. There he reads from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.... He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...." The word translated "forgiveness" in our text is translated there "release" and "free": "release of the captives and...to let the oppressed go free." The same word in Greek means forgiveness, release, freedom.

Judith Jones concluded: "The release or forgiveness that follows repentance does not undo past sins, but it does unbind people from them."

"The release or forgiveness that follows repentance does not undo past sins, but it does unbind people from them."

The truth is that we ALL need to be unbound--released, freed from the bondage of racism. Our neighbors of color need to be freed from the injustices that persist, given equal opportunity in education, housing, jobs, and treatment under the law. We who have benefitted for generations from white privilege need to be freed, too: from fear; from arrogance; from alienation from our fellow human beings; from shame and guilt for our sins and those of our forebears.

We cannot undo the sins of the past, but we can recognize them. And we can repent: change our minds, change our hearts, change our direction.

Here's a story. Claudia and I live on Penn Avenue South, two blocks north of 394.. It's a main traffic artery from the Northside to the highways. You remember the straightline winds on the summer solstice in 2013? They took out power to 600,000 households in the Twin Cities and brought down 1000s of trees. Next door to us a huge silver maple branch fell and completely blocked Penn Avenue. It was gigantic, as big as a good-sized tree itself. I figured the city or county would have to remove it. But I was wrong. When the storm stopped and traffic resumed, cars briefly backed up on either side of this enormous barrier. There were white people heading south and black people heading north. After a few minutes, they all simply got out of their cars and worked together from both sides to clear the road themselves. It was a pure, spontaneous collaboration for the benefit of all. Just imagine what we can do if we work together intentionally!

The partnership of equals is the model for the ministry we are seeking to create for St. John's in the coming year. It's all about relationships, friendships, as Sondra Samuels reminded us in her eloquent talk at the Day After Thanksgiving Bash (click [here](#) to see it)

Together with God's help, we and our neighbors can dismantle the social, psychological barriers between us. It will not be easy. Like any deep, enduring relationship, it will take time. It will take patience. We'll make mistakes and need forgiveness. It will challenge us all to grow beyond our personal prejudices. We whites will have the chance to recognize the burden of our privilege and lay it down.

If it feels like we're in a wilderness, that's not a bad thing. Through the wilderness, the people Israel reached the promised land. Our scriptures and our own experience show that the wilderness is a reality and a metaphor for a spiritual state of being. In the wilderness, stripped of illusions of autonomy and security--we can face the truth of ourselves. It's no coincidence that John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul all came to their ministries after times in the wilderness. If we are willing, in this state we can admit our own vulnerability, own our failings, recognize our utter dependence on the grace of God. We can meet God there. We can experience the inner transformation that comes when we change our ways, change our minds and hearts. As you know that's what repentance (*metanoia*) means: changing direction.

With God's help we can fill every valley of fear, level every mountain of distrust, make straight the crooked, twisted systems that oppress our sisters and brothers and divide us from one another. We can be released, unbound, from the sins of the past. We can take off the spiritual blinders that keep us from seeing our common humanity with every other child of God.

Together, we can clear and smooth the way for God's love to reach us all, to heal and unite us--so that **all** flesh shall see the salvation of God.

.