



The Deepest Truth

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn on the Nativity of St John the Baptist, June 26, 2022

Today is a mix of so many things. To begin with it is the day we celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, our church's namesake. It is Pride, when LGBTQ people from all over the world celebrate their identities which are natural, God-given, and beautiful. In fact our own Madison Gies put together a beautiful Pride Project that is on display at St. Mark's Cathedral in downtown Minneapolis—you should go see it. It is a week our nation's government has continued hearings about the January 6 attack on the Capitol. And it is a week the Supreme Court has overturned *Roe v. Wade*. While I recognize that our nation and perhaps even many of us have a multitude of perspectives on this, the Episcopal Church has explicitly and continuously supported a women's right to access abortions since the 1960s.¹ This is a deeply challenging time.

As I say those things, I imagine your heart has expanded and contracted like mine has. Perhaps you came here hoping to escape the madness out there. Perhaps you came here desperately hoping to find a way to deal with it all. Maybe your personal life has been such that you haven't paid much attention to all the hoopla in the news. Regardless, here we are,

¹ See Bishop Craig Loya, <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/June-24--Weekly-Message-to-ECMN-Clergy.html?soid=1102000925595&aid=uWGvzLke4VI>; See also The Episcopal Church, https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/summary-of-general-convention-resolutions-on-abortion-and-womens-reproductive-health/?fbclid=IwAR1zhuO-g_Df2E3XU51vByAEENiMaCd8IN1CgMK30xRV7K4HouH947ROIOo

gathered together like a weekly heartbeat, returning to center to ground and encounter the love of God in each other's faces and to be nourished for what lies ahead. We come here to be empowered not to react, but to respond with intention and love and courage. As I've struggled with my own big feelings this week, I want to share with you what has helped me. It is primarily about three places in our tradition that put me in touch with the deepest truth of what is beyond all that is so hard.

The first place is in the stories of our tradition that remind us of the times when God's justice and truth do break through, that even when people are killed for speaking truth to power that their stories are remembered, that sometimes the powerful are silenced, and old women and young teenaged girls become generative and the ones who get to name the future. Such is the story of John the Baptist. We know him as the forerunner to Christ, the one who came to prepare the way of the Lord. John evoked so much symbolically from his own tradition. His parents had him in old age, just like their forebears Abraham and Sarah. He wore camel's hair and ate locusts and honey just like the prophet Elijah. Like Moses he brought people to the River Jordan. Everything about him said tradition. And yet he turned tradition on its head. He believed that mere heritage and tradition and bloodline is not enough to put you in right relationship with God and with your deepest identity. He was pointing toward Jesus as the one who would show us the way to become who we truly already are.

How did John gain his vision? The scripture from today says this: "He was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel." This, in my own experience, is the second way to get in touch with what is most

deeply real. In the Hebrew imagination, the wilderness is always the place people go to hear the voice of God. The word for wilderness in Hebrew is *midbar*, which comes from the root word *dabar*, to speak. In the past I've sort of unreflectingly imagined that the reason you go to the wilderness to hear God speak is because it's empty and there is silence. But I don't think that's exactly true. I believe you go to the wilderness because the natural world is full of the presence of God. It is not empty. In each species, in the beautiful weave and interdependence of all life, in the ways trees communicate with each other through their roots and in the stories that the rocks tell, we can get out of our heads and connect with something deeper. John the Baptist spent most of his life in the wilderness, and I believe that in the wilderness the Holy Spirit taught him much about the presence of God and what things look like when ecosystems are in balance and not dominated by the abuse of power.

For us in the 21st century who have inherited a Christianity that has been entangled with empire for 1700 years, particularly those of European descent in the West, we have much to unlearn, much to deconstruct. The same was true for John the Baptist, and for the prophet Elijah whom John represents. Elijah and John were both prophetically urging the people of Israel to re-discover what fidelity to God looked like apart from the distortions of human power. One way to accomplish our task of distinguishing what of our tradition is truly of God is, like John, to humbly receive wisdom from God's presence in the earth, from indigenous expressions of the divine, to see Jesus through their eyes.

And there is a third way to access the deepest truth that going to the wilderness represents. Just as we spend time in nature to remind

ourselves that the noise and agitation of our social lives are not ultimate, we can also recognize that our intense visceral reactions to what is happening in this world are not the whole truth; that there is a deeper wisdom, a deeper self, that exists underneath and around and beyond our conscious or immediate feelings about what is happening. This is the self that we seek in meditation or centering prayer, the one that is made in the image of God and that is indestructibly sacred. It is the self that exists beyond words, at the level of the heart.

Perhaps some of you get Richard Rohr's daily meditation. This week on Friday, he said this:

Our absolute foundation is communion with God and others. This is the "deepest me" to which we must return before we act... From this foundation, we are able to act from a place of positive, loving energy.

But when we are hurt, or outraged, or deeply afraid, as many of us have been this week, it is hard to make choices from that place. In Friday's meditation Richard Rohr describes that intense visceral reaction as what Eckhart Tolle calls our "pain-body"—a negative energy that occupies your body and mind. I am all too familiar with this energy—in fact I'm sometimes embarrassed at how easily I am still triggered by some members of my family. Perhaps you can relate.

But the beautiful truth is this. The pain body is real, but it is not our deepest truth or our deepest self. It can feel totalitarian—perhaps your fear or anger about Roe vs. Wade or whatever else may be disturbing

you—feels like all there is. But, underneath and around our reactions is the divine sacred within us, which can compassionately and honestly hold our reactions without patronizing and without judgment. It is the place we touch deep within us and it is the place we touch in the wilderness. If we can remain connected with this part of ourselves, this place where the Spirit of God dwells and merges with our being, we can receive wisdom about how to respond to what is happening in this world.

You will recall that a few weeks ago, I talked about a number of values that the St. John's vestry has identified in the visioning exercises St. John's engaged in for the past six months. The first one is Sacredness. It is the affirmation that we are not made in original sin but in original blessing. This does not deny the reality of sin—all we have to do is read the news to know that our world is very sick—but again, sin and the pain body and the evil that is occurring are not the deepest truth. Sacredness is. And if we enter conversations with our neighbors and the public sphere grounded in love and in the expectation of finding light in one another, that will radically change *how* we fight for justice, *how* we seek the truth, *how* we make sacrifices for the common good beyond our narrow self-interest. That *how* will involve recognizing that at the level of reasoning with other people, we may be completely powerless. Being nice and empathetic with those we disagree with will likely not change much. But in the silence of the wilderness, when we can touch beneath the surface to experience the interconnection and the innate light in all things, at the level beyond words, we can be empowered by the Spirit of God to enact Jesus' nonviolent way of love. To use it in creative ways to resist evil, as Martin Luther King and Gandhi and others have done. To

find in it a deep reservoir of nonviolent power and inspiration and connection even with our enemies.

If you would be willing, this week, I invite you to a simple exercise, and I will do it too. Begin by identifying wherever your pain-body is most activated. In other words, what is most bothering you, where do you have no peace, where are you full of angst or anger or fear?

In that place, set aside five minutes to go to a quiet place and be silent. Even better if you can do this outside somewhere. In that silence, seek to become aware of the part of you where God dwells, that exists beyond that anger or fear. Perhaps remember a time you were not angry, or when you felt most connected with God and others. Then allow the part of yourself that exists beyond your anger, where God dwells, to tenderly care for the part of you that is hurt. Listen to the words of Zechariah from today's reading:

Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors...to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all our days...

By the tender mercy of our God the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

After you do this, what shifts in your awareness or experience? Does anything change in the way you actually think or speak or behave? If

you do this regularly, what might God make possible that otherwise seems impossible?

May the light of Christ illumine our innermost being, liberate us from all that is imperial, and open us to the wisdom of the earth and the scriptures. May we daily, regularly touch the deepest place of our being where we are one with God, where love alone exists. May we act from this place in all that we do, for the healing of the world God so loves. Amen.