

## "Shouts in the Jungle"

Last week I spoke of hope in the midst of endings. New beginnings can follow closings. Sometimes we need a nudge (a push, a shove?) off the old path and onto the new one. Sometimes the trail into the "bush" at our home in Tonga can get overgrown and difficult to follow. Sometimes because of flooding, or a fallen tree, people make an alternate trail. There are times when it's easy to get lost. You might hear a familiar voice calling you over this way or that – you can hear them but you can't see them, the jungle is so thick. Yet when you're lost those shouts in the jungle can be a life-saver.

### **A Voice Crying in the Wilderness**

Here it is the second Sunday of Advent and if we can listen, comes a voice saying something about preparing. [Advent used to be more of a quiet, reflective time. But things have certainly changed and maybe that's okay, except that now Advent is so full of Christmas activities that it seems to get confused with Christmas itself. I know I go against the current on this, but I wish we could slow down during Advent, do a little more reflection, contemplation, maybe even a lot more silence, certainly fewer activities, so that perhaps we'd more clearly understand Christmas when it does come, and then do the celebrating.]

John was the name of that voice. Many years before John the Baptist there had been a prophet of the Lord by the name of Malachi. He spoke to the people of Jerusalem after they had returned from their captivity in Babylon and had rebuilt the city (between 515 and 445 b.c.). He exhorted the people to remain sincere and true in their worship of God in the place where the Temple had stood, as they awaited the Lord's arrival. Early Christian leaders saw in this Malachi text a reference to John the Baptist as the Lord's messenger and to Jesus as the Lord, even though in Malachi's time he could not have foreseen that. Yet Malachi's words ring as true as John the Baptist's about preparing for the Lord. With our sincere and true worship we can be prepared for the Lord's return; and in a sense we are John the Baptist.

John shouted into *a world we know*; a world that could be described as a wilderness, a jungle. Does your day to day feel like a jungle sometimes? What kind of wilderness or jungle do we find ourselves in these days? Some years back I saw a title for a book: *Backpacking in a Spiritual Wilderness*. [It was about being a Christian in today's world.]

You've heard some say "It's a jungle out there." Life can be stressful. Actually life is a struggle most of the time, and a lot of our stress is the result of unsatisfactory human relations. Most of the time the "jungle" is not just out there, but inside as well. In fact it starts in here and that's why it's out there.

To understand how this has happened we must go back in time, way back. . . At the moment that creation came out of the hands of God, at the very same moment that God brought he and she into being, the Lord said, "This is good, what has been made by us."

But they, he and she, responded by saying, "Let us determine for ourselves what is good and what is bad. We don't need God for that." So they ate from the tree that was reserved to

God alone. Then did the whole tree of life begin to grow awry; in jungle-like fashion with offshoots and undergrowths, and wild growths, and overgrowths; so twisted and contorted that it grew in upon itself and strangled some parts while others decayed. Then, they themselves, he and she, decided they were naked, and so they were. They were embarrassed by what they'd become and ashamed of what they had done, and not done. . .

John came as the voice of the Lord, which is so rarely heard in a world where the original goodness of the sky and the earth, of flowers and trees, of the animals, of men and women, has practically been lost.

## **Something Missing**

There's something missing. All we have to do is look at the society around us with all kinds of terrible problems - lives messed up, marriages broken, families broken, our own hidden weaknesses or excesses exposed - and we see why. We face challenges, problems, obstacles all around us. Sometimes the problems are circumstances, and sometimes they're people. Financial and economic distress weigh heavily on some; while health concerns, interpersonal relations, weigh on others. I'm sure we'll continue to face conflicts of values, of power and personality. That is just part of our fallen nature. Yet we continue to try to work out our lives as though God had no part to play; as though He couldn't or wouldn't help us.

It is the most difficult thing to admit or recognize, but our lives will never get in order until we admit it. We humans, on our own, by ourselves, cannot produce our own good, our own contentment, our own peace with our Maker. Oh, sure some do a fair job of it; they put their noses to the grindstone, work hard, look successful. Others flit about, unable to land anywhere, always looking for that "right" spot.

*For 13 years Peter Lynch was the manager of the Fidelity Magellan Fund, Magellan was the top-ranked general equity fund. Time Magazine called Lynch the nation's "number one money manager." About his success, Lynch writes:*

*"As much as I enjoyed managing a portfolio the size of the GNP of Ecuador, I missed being home to watch the children grow up. They change fast. They almost had to introduce themselves to me every weekend. I was spending more time with Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and Sallie Mae than I spent with them. When you start to confuse Freddie Mac, Sallie Mae, and Fannie Mae with members of your family, and you remember 2,000 stock symbols but forget your children's birthdays, there's a good chance you've become too wrapped up in your work.*

*In 1989 I was celebrating my 46th birthday with my wife, Carolyn, and my daughters, Mary, Annie, and Beth. In the middle of the party, I had a revelation. I remembered that my father had died when he was 46 years old. You start to feel mortal when you realize you're only going to exist for a little while, whereas you're going to be dead for a long time. You start wishing you'd seen more school plays and ski meets and afternoon soccer games. You remind yourself that nobody on his deathbed ever said, 'I wish I'd spent more time at the office.'"*

## **Hope is Born**

While we look for the right teacher, the right leader, just the right job or opportunity to make us whole, John the Baptist comes along, shouting into the jungle of our lives. He spoke about an axe laid at the roots of that sick old tree.

You've heard about the party crashers at the White House last week? John the Baptist is the Christmas party crasher! In his day, this rough-spoken, fiery messenger was an uncomfortable prophet in a pre-Jesus society. It's still his day! Now, in our post-Jesus world he shouts his uncompromising message as the unusual herald pointing to the Christ whom we await. As the parade toward Christmas celebrations begins; as it winds its way through our days; as the crowd presses forward to that day; Jesus' wild, desert cousin steps onto the parade route; he spreads his feet, squares his shoulders, and yells, "Prepare God's arrival! Make the road smooth and straight! Every ditch will be filled in, every bump smoothed out, the detours straightened out, all the ruts paved over. Everyone will be there to see the parade of God's salvation."<sup>1</sup>

Some are embarrassed at his words. This isn't what they're looking for at this festive time of year. Some try to edge around him. But John scurries in front of them and speaks the same, relentless announcement. His entire demeanor is inappropriate to the event. He simply won't let anyone pass through Advent to Christmas until they deal with his message. What would John the Baptist post on his Facebook page, or on Twitter? What impassioned message would he have today? What must he do to get our attention, and what would he say about our need for change? His words point at us and ask, "Who are you really, under that costume, and which parade are you following? Whose side are you on, really?" And then we're forced to take a look at the spot where we are standing. How'd we get here?

The Bible tells that hope is often born in barren places or tangled confusion or when something's missing. When everything appears a wasteland or totally mixed up, and we're lost in it, that's the right place for hope to be born. When all the noise and lights of Christmas are gone, when the cash registers are silenced, the pain and anxiety of the world will still reverberate in our barren souls. Into that lonely place God's gift of hope is offered.

The only way to really find hope is to enter the jungle and wilderness: the broken, barren and empty places; the tangled, confused, mixed-up places, in our world and in our lives. We must first face those places within us; to acknowledge our need, confront our sorrow, pain; to name the sin, and to trade our phony optimism for the hope only God can give. It's the only way out of the jungle; it's our only salvation.

*The movie "Saving Private Ryan" ends with Captain Miller (Tom Hanks' character) sitting near a bridge after an attack by German forces. His life is ebbing away as he pulls Ryan (Matt Damon) down toward him. Struggling for breath he whispers, "Earn this, earn this." As Ryan stands his face morphs back into the present as a senior adult searching for Miller's cross in the cemetery. Crying he turns to his wife and says, "Tell me I'm a good man." Many people may believe that Christ died for them, but they have an attitude that Christ told them, "Earn this." They spend their lives through religion trying to receive validation so that people will tell them, "You are a good man or a good woman." Grace is realizing that we can never earn Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross. Our lives should reflect thanksgiving for what he has done instead of validation for being a good person. We can never earn salvation. We can only receive it and give thanks.*

A voice is crying to you and me. Can you hear him? The word of hope, the word of the Lord comes in the barren places in our lives, and most of the time God speaks to people who

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.

are listening. [When the student is ready, the teacher appears.] The word of hope emerges from a life of disciplined prayer, bible reflection, worship, and fellowship with the community of believers. Advent is for entering into these traditional disciplines so as to tune our ears to hear the angels' song.

A voice *does* shout in our wilderness. The One who can clear away the jungle of our lives; the One who can lead us out of the wilderness; that One is about to arrive. Prepare a highway for him – straight into your life. There's never been a better time receive Him; never been a better time in this ole wilderness.