

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
8 December 2019
II Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12**

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance...

Here we are at Advent II. The second Sunday in Advent. Last week I preached about Advent being a season of preparation, waiting, and expectation. It's not the Christmas season, in the church, it's Advent. And I pointed out that the readings during Advent focus, last week on the patriarchs, this week on the prophets, next week on John the Baptist, and the fourth week of Advent on the Virgin Mary.

Today we hear John the Baptist, that crazy character dressed in camel's hair and eating wild locusts and honey in the wilderness, proclaiming in the words of Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Think about what a sight that must have been... And what the people may have thought. But he produced results, baptized many, including his cousin Jesus.

So John was a prophet, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and others. What do prophets do? We tend to think that prophets in Old Testament times were seers or predictors of the future. But actually they weren't these people who had amazing talents to tell what was going to happen. Rather, they were truth-tellers of the present. Those who say the tough words to those in power. Those who hold the mirror up. Are prophets just Old Testament phenomena?

This has been an incredible week in Madrid. *Impresionante!* La Cumbre del Clima! The United Nations Climate Change Talks, also called COP 25, are taking place in Madrid this past week and next. You have likely heard that it was supposed to be in Chile, but due to the government difficulties and severe protests, still ongoing, it was suddenly changed to Madrid. With only three weeks' notice, a major international conference with around 20,000 attendees was transferred from the southern to the northern hemisphere. From Chile to Spain. And Spain has done a marvelous and impressive job of putting it together. So much so that on Monday when King Felipe was greeting the dignitaries at a reception at El Palacio Real, the Secretary General of the UN was extremely complimentary, over and over, about what a great job was done in organizing this very complex event, and in only three weeks! Well done good and faithful servants!

The event has been impressive. With very good international coverage and broad involvement, especially of youth. On Friday evening as I was walking along the Paseo de Eduardo Dato on the overpass over Paseo de la Castellana I was surprised, and pleased, to see an extremely large, impressive, and very slow moving, march for climate change coming down La Castellana. Young and old, the Paseo was filled, and for a very long time. In the discussions most of the countries of the world are deciding how to balance the tension between further abusing our planet with our life style, and living with modern conveniences. Tough choices. But the mirror is being held up.

Now I know there may be differences of opinion here on climate change. And I will respect your opinion if you will respect mine. But let me say, I am a scientist, a trained scientist, have looked at the literature and the data, and am convinced that the evidence is overwhelming that the earth is warming, we do have global warming, and it is a result of human activity. If you don't want to believe the science, then take a practical look at the world. Geologists tell us and we know that North America was almost totally deciduous forest until the settler arrived in the 17th century. No longer. In England shrubs and bushes and trees grow if you don't cut them out. And here in Spain, farming over many centuries has changed the landscape. Two other major pieces. The internal combustion engine, cars and trucks and airplanes are burning fossil fuels; that has to be making a difference. And last, air conditioning. What is normal about air conditioning. We are indeed changing the planet. We have.

So are prophets just a phenomenon of the Old Testament? I would like to suggest that the youth marching today are our modern day prophets, those speaking truth to power. Those truth tellers of the present. Greta Thunberg, the 15 year old girl from Sweden was in Madrid Friday and said, "We are in the middle of a climate and ecological emergency. We need to start treating this crisis like a crisis and we have to step out of our comfort zones and tell the people in power that they must take responsibility for the future and for the future generations." A modern day prophet? Probably.

Now I'm probably stepping out there a bit and this may be more politically active than this parish or many Anglican places of worship are used to. Those of you who know me a bit, and I have been here nine months now, hard to believe, and will be leaving soon, know that I tend to stick pretty close to the appointed scriptures, actually the gospel reading, with occasional person vignettes and stories thrown in. I rarely venture into politically sensitive action topics. However, this week I read that "...prophetic preaching is never an abstract activity. It is deeply contextual. Radically locational. Absolutely circumstantial." What happened in Madrid this week has been very contextual, very relevant, and very important.

But I am not a lone voice crying in the wilderness like John the Baptist. Nor is Greta Thunberg. Bp Philip Huggins of Australia, President of the Nation Council of Churches in Australia, and Director for Ecumenical Studies at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture is here as a representative at the climate change conference and has been worshipping here at St. George's while in Madrid. He points out in a reflection of the second Sunday in Advent, today, that trees are a common theme in our scripture reading. Our first reading mentions the shoot coming out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch growing. The Psalm talks about the mountains and the hills, and the gospel describes John in the wilderness of Judea, where there are short scrubby trees, and John's crying in the wilderness as well as people being along the banks of the River Jordan where there are many trees. And also describing the ax lying at the root of the trees. So indeed trees are a theme in our readings. Think how many trees in the world have been cut

down to build cities and highways and parking lots. Not the way the world was initially designed by God. Remember those forests all across North America, until the 1700's...

Brother David Vryhoff, of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston has recently written, "Are we willing to hear God's admonition and to accept God's guidance, or are we happy to justify our selfish behaviour and chart our own way of life? May the Lord find in us hearts that are open and ready to receive him, whenever and however he chooses to come to us."

He came as Jesus the Christ the first time...who knows what Christ's second coming will look like....! Or what prophets of our time need to tell us. Truth to power. Perhaps this is our call to, as human beings, rally around something that truly unites us — saving our planet.

How do we do that? Bishop Philip has written, "In simple terms, the one human family on this tiny planet in a vast universe of God's creation, just have to love one another better! If we are to give hope by preventing further climate change, more wars and more refugees, humanity has to cooperate together in a quite unprecedented way. ...It is a time, therefore, of partnerships with all people of good will. It is a time of certainty, when the deepest possible unity is needed between those who are disciples of Jesus." And I would add, with all.

Indeed. We on this planet are already divided enough — with enough polarization to go around. We already don't know what to do with refugees from political trauma and war. What will we do when there are refugees from climate change? When Pacific Islands like Vanuatu start disappearing due to rising sea levels, when seaside villages are inundated, and when there is not enough water for drinking and bathing as occurred in South Africa earlier this year.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. What does your fruit look like?

Amen.