

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as 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. ⁵Every 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, ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

⁷John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

I tell you what, friends. I have been so moved during my first few months with you. From worshipping in the Chapel in the Pines, which has been almost entirely remodeled for our safety and accessibility to our first Rally Day together and then to see the table for World Communion and then the Harvest table for Thanksgiving. Seeing children fill the steps during Children’s time to hearing the handbells play right behind me and now, seeing the sanctuary transform for Advent, to see the tags completely disappear off of our Angel tree and now to see the Chrismon and Jesse trees adorned today as we sang our hearts out, it’s just been a remarkable journey so far, and I’m truly blessed.

If it weren’t for these crazy scripture texts I’m being challenged to preach about, things would be truly magical. I mentioned last week that at this time of year, the assigned scripture readings often include difficult passages of warnings and panic and destruction even as we prefer to skip ahead to the end of the journey to Bethlehem and celebrate the

newborn king. But instead, we hear from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Malachi, and Zephaniah, and today we hear from John the Baptizer and Ezekiel, too.

There's as many prophetic texts during Advent as there are Christmas Carols, and that leads me to this idea I've had. I'm thinking next year of introducing a new tradition to Dunn's Corners Community Church, but I want to get your opinion on it. So give me an Amen if you'd like to have a version of the carol sing we had this morning, but instead of calling out your favorite carols, you have the chance to call out your favorite prophesy for all of us to hear. Instead of "Number 88 – O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!" we hear "Daniel 5 – the floating hand writing a message on the wall." Or "Ezekiel 37 – dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones being put back together!" We'd give time for three to twelve passages about repentance and punishment, fire and judgment. That would be fun, right? As fun as the carols we just sang? So, all in favor of random prophesy readings right before Christmas, say amen! All opposed, say no thank you! (Mr. Clerk, let the records show, the motion does not carry.)

I get it. The prophets are known for things like eating locusts and warning that when God shows up, it's not going to be pretty, and they use the most unusual visual images and symbolism to get their message across. Prophets get a bad wrap for those reasons.

So it's especially strange to me that there are lots and lots of prophetic readings that are scheduled during Advent. And we focus today on John the Baptist who is calling everyone to repentance. He's not sugarcoating his message. It's piercing and personal. Repent and be baptized and be good, or Jesus will cut you down.

Honestly, at what other point in the year do we get to hear the voices of prophets so loudly? When else do you read Malachi and Zephaniah, am I right? It's just before sweet little baby Jesus arrives. Strange timing, especially as this is the week we're supposed to be focused on peace. How do we do that when the message is doom and gloom and we're identified as a brood of vipers? Sheesh! What peace is there in the prophets? Why do we even need them when their very existence makes us nervous?

Speaking of things that make me nervous by their very existence, allow me to change the subject for a moment. Have you noticed the rising popularity of ice baths? They're not just for athletes anymore. There's been a surge of endorsements by medical gurus for ice baths. Lots of videos on social media of people using a hammer or weight to break a layer of ice on an outdoor tub of water, and climb in up to their neck. Oh, my, goodness. I'll vote no thank you to that, but celebrities and health experts are singing their praises and Costco is advertising at-home ice bath tubs as Christmas gifts, perfect for the relative that maybe isn't your favorite in-law?

By calling me here to be your pastor, you helped me avoid the Texas version of an ice bath. There's an annual fundraiser at my former church that supports the San Antonio Food Bank. The staff members compete against each other to avoid jumping into an outdoor pool on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. It's called the Turkey Plunge. The staff member with the highest donation total in their name has to jump so we encourage our congregation to give in another staff member's name. I've had to plunge three times, but it's worth it. The Turkey Plunge has raised about \$40,000 in 8 years, and it puts food insecurity front and center for the congregation for a month leading up to the event.

But here's the point, ice baths and Turkey Plunges and prophetic words have something in common. They're all a shock to your system, a wake up for your whole body, mind and spirit. And I think we need a prophet right now to startle us out of our routine and stupor.

If I lost you there, don't despair. I know it seems counterintuitive that on the Sunday of Advent when we focus on peace, I would suggest that we need to hear a prophet startle us. I know it may seem like a stretch, and you may not buy the connection, but let me try to explain as I've come to understand it.

I think, for the most part, that God is constantly trying to communicate with us, encourage us, motivate us, show us compassion, praise us – constantly, but we often ignore it.

How many of us take dedicated time to listen for God's words to us? We're so busy and distracted. It reminds me of what I've heard from some parents - that their children can get so lost in a screen or oblivious with their earbuds – staring at phones, tablets, laptops, video games, or televisions – that they tune out everything else. The parents ask them to come to dinner, or get ready for bed, or ask about how school was, and there's absolutely no response. So they ask a second time. Then the third time they say their child's name first, so they feel sure the child knows the parent is talking to them and not someone else in the room, but still no response. So they increase their volume a little or a lot. Still nothing. The child's full name comes out, (Susan Elizabeth Rogers!) but there's still no reply. Finally, the parent snaps - there's a stomp on the floor or a clap of hands or a yell (Hey! Listen to me!), and finally, the child looks up, startled, offended, and scared because the parent looks angry and the child has no idea why. The original question was, "What would you like to drink with dinner, sweetie?" but now, it's "Hey! Listen to me! I said your name six times before I got your attention! What do you want to drink!?!"

When I tell the kids that I've been calling out to them seven times, I mean, when other parents tell their kids they've called out seven times, we know it doesn't do anything to fix the problem. The kids feel defensive and scared when we speak that way. The outburst is my snarky way of saying, "I'm important and you're not being a responsive, respectful listener. It hurts that you are more focused on the YouTuber or the Minecraft game than on me. I feel frustrated and sad that my voice, lovingly and gently calling your name, does not illicit a quick, attentive response. I love you so much, and I am working so hard for you to have what you want and need, and I can't even get eye contact when I call your name anymore."

But then I realize that God could just as easily say those things about how frustrating it is trying to communicate with me. How my inattention and unresponsiveness reflect on my relationship with God. I'm the one ignoring the gentle, loving voice of my Heavenly Parent, who wants to know how I'm feeling, what I need right now, what I'm worried about. And it must hurt when the only time I approach God is when I need something, like how I

feel when my kids only come up to me to ask for yet another snack. I just feel like the short order cook and not the mom.

Sometimes I have to look in a mirror and realize my kids are just doing to me what I do to God. As our neighbor, Taylor Swift says, “It’s me, hi, I’m the problem, it’s me.” So yeah. I need a prophet to grab my attention every now and then. Someone to say, “Hey! [clap hands] Over here! God’s trying to talk to you! Pay attention!”

And then, when I’m paying attention, God’s voice comes through peacefully. A little prophetic attention-grabbing to get to the peace.

Of course, some of you are much more attuned to God’s still, small voice than I am. Maybe you don’t need a prophet to startle you the way I do. And I want to make sure you hear me say this. The vast majority of prophets in our scriptures are speaking to the general population or the wealthy and powerful. It’s not often that a scriptural prophecy is directed at one person (though there are some). The point is, I don’t want you to go home and personalize all the prophetic texts, as if John the Baptist is calling you a sinful viper in need of repentance before Jesus comes and starts swinging the ax, because that’s just not the way prophesy is to be applied.

But I don’t think I’m the only one who feels the need for a wakeup call every now and then, and so, I am going to ask you to do something right here, right now. I want you to think about a struggle you’ve had recently. It could be anything. Big or small. Personal or general. Do we have that in our heads? I see the serious looks on your faces.

Now, imagine, or put faith in the idea, that God has been trying to speak to you about what’s on your mind. Reaching out in subtle, gentle, quiet ways. God softly saying, “I’m here. I am with you. What can I do for you? What do you need? (or) You’re right, this is not fair. (or) Be brave. You can do this.” Even messages like “You’re better than this. I know you are. I believe you can do better.” How many times can you imagine God trying to reach out to you like this, and you just don’t hear it.

We don't tune in to God's frequency when it's this gentle. We don't give any space to listen in our prayers. We don't journal or look up from our screens or take time to read Scripture or Andy's Advent Devotional, or even take a deep breath and exhale with intention. If we hear something, we brush the message aside. We doubt that God would even have time for us.

So sometimes the only way, the only way, for the message of God's peace to penetrate the heart and mind is for a prophet to yell at us and make us listen in ways we hadn't before.

Sometimes God has to yell it out through a prophet. "I love you!" "You can do this! I believe in you!" "You're better than this!" "Stop doubting yourself!" "I still love you, you stubborn child of mine!"

Sometimes we need a prophet in our lives who can snap us out of our stupor with a startling, over the top, attention-grabbing word. It may not bring peace at first. In fact, it may bring surprise. We may get so startled that we get the hiccups, but God knows, the message tried to get through countless times, and so we need a prophet to wake us up as if we took a cold shower.

Let me be your Advent prophet for you today. Let me say to you, "Listen up! Jesus is coming and God's been trying to tell you something!" What do you think the message will be? That's your homework for this week. Don't make God yell. Listen. Let it come peacefully. Amen