



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Sermon by Pastor Jami Anderson, December 11, 2011

One piece of coursework required before ordination was called Clinical Pastoral Education and generally it involved a three month full time chaplaincy program in a hospital setting. In that setting we would divide our 40 hour week between visits to patients and classroom learning. One assignment I had that summer was to write a rather long paper on “functional theology” that would be presented to the class. The main focus of this paper was to declare how I lived my beliefs, with a special emphasis on our motivation for ministry. In other words, we had to say why we were pursuing ordained ministry – and that answer was not to be some pious answer like – “I was called.” Rather, we had to explore what motivated us, what was important to us, and how what we believed matched what we did. I struggled with that paper and I remember the day it was my turn to share the paper with my group. As I was presenting the paper, inspiration struck, and I proclaimed, quite righteously, “I want to be the finger that points to God.”

Strangely, that next week the finger became mysteriously infected with an awful sore that had to be treated several times at the hospital clinic. It required painful cleaning every day and I went around for weeks taking antibiotics and covering the inflammation and waiting for it to get better. I have wondered about the significance of the infection on that finger coming right after my announcement to the group. I’ve wondered if God resented being “given the finger” as it were or was I off somehow in my philosophy of ministry? That wondering actually weaves itself into today’s readings.

In case you haven’t been paying attention, or forgotten somehow, we are still in the midst of Advent. You can notice that now three candles are lit- there’s only one more to go. Our time of preparation for the coming of Jesus is nearly over. But for today, we are back spending time with John the Baptist. And I find that strange. We had our reading last week about John crying out in the wilderness. Now this week we hear again about John the Baptist. Why so much about John? We are in this time preparing for the birth of Jesus. Why aren’t we focusing on Jesus? Instead, we keep hearing about a strange dude who wasn’t Jesus. He doesn’t even have any miracles to his credit that we know of. So, I figure there must be some reason we need to hear about John the Baptist over and over.

John the Baptist was not the Messiah – we know that. John knew that and he had no problem with that fact. He lets everyone know that he comes before the Messiah and he points the way to the Messiah. He proclaimed the coming of one whom John was not even worthy to untie his sandals. He proclaimed the bridegroom, the one who was more powerful than he, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. John prepared the way for others to recognize the Christ. So, John the Baptist is an important focus for us because it is our lives that must also emulate, be the same as, the life of John the Baptist.

None of us are the Christ. We are preparing to remember the birth of Christ. We will remember again the life of Christ and we will take into our hearts all we can learn about who Christ was and is. But we are not the Christ. The best of our lives can be is following in the footsteps of John the Baptist. What we know we can show.

And that brings back to mission and ministry and doing something beautiful for God. The word we see and hear at the beginning of this gospel reading of John is that John came as a witness to testify to the light. A witness. We also can be, are asked to be, witnesses to the light.

And we who also know our calling as witnesses would do well to pay attention to the way that John the Baptist carried out his ministry. He was unafraid to be strange – to live in a way that allowed him to do his ministry. I would guess that his simple diet and strange clothing kept him unencumbered from having too much to bother with or worry about. He was willing to stand apart, to be different. He recognized the ultimate importance of the one who was greater than he. And he proclaimed what he recognized. He told others, how kept pointing the way to the answer. And in pointing the way to the answer he was humble. He always pointed beyond himself.

So mission and witness become entwined because both should be about who we are – who we are as God's people. I quote I read this week says that, "Mission is not primarily something that goes out from God's people – like sending money or sending missionaries – but something that defines God's people as existing for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful." The quote is from Scott Bader-Saye, an ethics teacher in the Episcopal Church. And those same words of mission are found in today's Isaiah reading. "He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....to comfort all who mourn;

(Talk about living in ways strange to our culture. I sent a bulletin with those words on the cover to a parishioner in prison and they refused to let her have it. They censored those words from Isaiah!)

We are defined by our mission, our witness. So, I wasn't wrong in my desire to be a finger pointing to God, but perhaps I was limited in my outlook. It is all of me that must be pointing to God; my entire life, that words I speak, the actions I take, the choices I make.

And that is true for all of us at St. Andrew's. We have a witness to share in this community. A witness for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful. A witness that points always towards God. A witness that is filled with a power beyond us, within us, surrounding us, directing us.

Our lives as voices crying out in the wilderness. Our lives as "something beautiful for God."

Thanks be to God.