

A Voice in the Wilderness

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The sounds of Christmas. Do you hear what I hear? ♪*Do you hear what I hear?*♪

What do you hear this Christmas season? What are some of your favorite songs, your favorite sounds of this time of year? What do you hear in December in the season of Advent? Carols? Do you hear the bells ringing? Do you hear kids crying on Santa's lap? Gift wrap being torn open? Which usually means either sounds of glee or sounds of disappointment. (That happened to me once. My spouse gave me walkie-talkies. I was like, "What is this?") You might hear the sounds of toys breaking... which then leads again to kids crying, or maybe even adults. What do you hear?

Take a moment and reflect. What is your favorite sound of the season; your favorite sound of Christmas?

(Silence for people to reflect.)

Maybe the gentle falling of snowflakes that we awoke to this morning. One of my favorite sounds of Christmas was always on Christmas Eve. We'd have a large gathering at my house growing up with a lasagna dinner. And at some point, I would start to hear the shaking of bells. I knew that shaking of bells meant Santa Clause was coming. It meant Santa Clause was gonna blow into our door, and come into this great gathering, and I would have this opportunity to give Santa a hug and say a few things of what I wanted in the season. That's just one of my memories of Christmas.

In our carol today, we're asked that question, "Do you hear what I hear?" In the verse here we are taken to the shepherd boy. The shepherd boy is asked that question, "Do you hear what I hear?" by the little lamb. What do you hear? And then the shepherd at this point kind of moves us to our Christmas Eve scripture; the story in Luke of the shepherds being out there in the fields and hearing the voice of the angels. It kind of fits this song the shepherd boy hears above the trees; the angels calling. And if you remember that part of the story, also remember it has the angel saying to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid. For see I am bringing you tidings of great joy for all the people." Is that what the song is asking us to hear?

But then the song tells us that voice was as big as the sea. Think about a voice that's as big as the sea. I get the feeling that the writers aren't talking about the waves just gently lapping on the beach. When they're talking about a voice as big as the sea, this to me sounds like a sea that's making some noise. It's got waves crashing against the rocks. If you've been to the coast when it's windy and the waves are crashing against the rocks, it's noisy. It's raucous. It's loud.

When I think about that voice of Christmas, it does take me, in this season of Advent, to our friend John the Baptist. John the Baptist is not known for singing a nice gentle song above the trees. You heard that in the scripture this morning. John the Baptist comes with thunder. He

comes on the scene and comes out yelling, “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven has come near! Prepare the way of the Lord!” John the Baptist says, ‘change your hearts and lives.’

The interesting thing is the people there heard this as an invitation. Because it says at this point in our story that the people heard John saying, “Repent. Come near. For the Spirit has come near.” And they come to John the Baptist to be baptized in the River Jordan. Not only do they come to be baptized, but in the process of being baptized they start confessing their sins. So, I get this picture at the Jordan River that what we’re hearing is people coming and saying, “Ok, this is what I’ve done in my life. This is what I’ve done wrong. Here’s what I need to confess,” and John the Baptist gives them the gift of water, and everybody somehow feels at rest and at peace.

Now, can you imagine us doing that in our worship? Vocalizing our confessions of our sins? We willingly participate in a prayer of confession, cause they’re pretty generic when it comes down to it. We’re not confessing anything specific we’re feeling bad about right now. And then you get to be silent... and just kinda think to yourself and be like, ‘oh yeah, yeah, I’m pretty sure I hurt that person’s feelings this week.’ Or, ‘Yeah, I don’t think I was very nice to the person at the cash register. I was impatient.’ We get to do that all silently. Yet, somehow, John the Baptist creates this invitation where all the people come, and they just start confessing their sins when they’re baptized.

I heard that in the song we just sang by Mary Chapin Carpenter, “Come Darkness, Come Light.” I happen to have that album, so it was fun to have that sung here this morning and share in that. It has some wonderful lines in it. It said, “come whole, come broken, come as you are.” Somehow that’s the invitation John the Baptist gave to people. Just come.

Then the tone of the scripture changes. John the Baptist sees these Pharisees and these Sadducees who have come to be baptized. He’s just not feeling as comfortable with them. In that moment his voice really does become bigger than the sea. This is where the thunder comes in and he starts saying things like, “You brood of vipers, you children of snakes. Who warned you? You had better show me that you have changed.” Now... this is not much of a theology of grace... but that’s really for another sermon.

What’s interesting is, do we still hear the words of John the Baptist as invitation at this point? Do we still hear grace? Or are we starting now to hear judgment? Or is there a prophetic word that is present? Or at this point does it all just get lost in the noise of the water splashing and the shouts of confession? Does it all just kinda get lost and we just don’t worry about it anymore? Are we all just tuned out when we start hearing, “brood of vipers”? It raises the question, can we hear repentance as Good News?

In my reading of a few commentaries this week I found some, I think, helpful quotes about repentance. One of them says,

“What John and Advent reminds us, is that repentance is not merely about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God’s desire to realign us accordingly with Christ’s life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings, as about God’s power to transform us into Christ’s image.”

And secondly,

“Because John, and the Jesus he announces, arrive with the most astonishing combination of acceptance and admonition, we all discover this Advent, not only that we are cherished for who we are, but that we are responsible for what we do. That can be good Advent news, because if God does not care about what we do, I begin to suspect that God does not actually care about me. If God loves me enough to welcome me into Christ’s family, then God loves me enough to expect something of me.”

That’s why John the Baptist, even when he gets a bit harsh, is still offering a word saying, “God loves you. God cares about you. God wants you to repent; to turn yourself more toward God’s way of living; living with that grace and that peace, living with that sense of justice and working towards that in the world. God has not given up on you. God sees that you can turn and be made into a new person.”

Can we hear that? Do we hear that?

And what about our carol, “Do You Hear What I Hear?” Is it more than just a beloved carol that was made famous by Bing Crosby back in 1963? Is it just a sentimental carol about a star dancing up in the sky and a song above the trees? But is it maybe also a mix of prophecy and grace and acceptance and responsibility? Are there any signs of repentance in these words?

Well, I did a little digging, and I learned a little bit about this song, “Do You Hear What I Hear?” Many Christmas carols were actually written during either the Civil War or around World War II. This one happened to be written in 1962. It was written by Noël Regney and Gloria Shayne. In 1962 when they wrote this song, was right at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. They were asked to write a song for the B-side of a single, I guess. They instead found themselves saying they needed to do something in response to the existential dread they felt because of the Cold War.

So, they were wrestling with this. Noël shared that in the studio the producer was listening to the radio to see if we had been obliterated. That’s how serious it was feeling at that time. Then he goes on and he shares, “In route to my home I saw two mothers with their babies in strollers. The little angels were looking at each other and smiling.” That’s what inspired him to write that first line, “Said the night wind to the little lamb.”

An interesting sidenote as we look a little more into the words of this song, is that their daughter reflects the song really surprises her. Because her parents were not particularly religious. Gloria was raised Jewish but did not practice that faith much. And Noël was raised catholic and left the church as an adult. So, the fact that this song ended up having such religious undertones surprised their daughter, who also shared that her father was born in France. During World War II, when the Germans and the Nazis took over some parts of France, Noël was forced to be in the Nazi army. When that happened, he found himself so repulsed he became a spy for the French Resistance, and eventually escaped the Nazi army to join the French Resistance.

It was all of this undercurrent that causes them to write this song. So, when you begin to look at the words, there is more happening here than a simple song about a lamb and a shepherd boy

out in the night. That very first verse where it talks about the “star with a tail as big as a kite” is also creating an image of what bombs look like in the sky. I will never read or sing that line the same way again.

The voice as big as the sea, again, gets us to that point where the sea is violent and banging against the rocks with sounds like large volumes of noise like bombs and the fear that creates. The verse you get to look at next week makes a reference to a child shivering in the cold. It reminds us in the midst of war there are people that are harmed and hurt. They are left in the cold and left to hunger and want. In that same verse the shepherd boy goes to a king in comfort and brings that question of, “Do you know what I know?” Do you know about the child shivering in the night? Do you know about the people made homeless in the cold?

This is where you get to the question of, ‘Is there any repentance in this song?’ In the very last verse, I believe there is some repentance, some change of heart. Because then it is the king who goes and says to the people, “Pray for peace, people everywhere.”

Interesting, what all is captured in this carol that usually I have just blissfully and mystically just sung and embraced. ♪*Do you hear what I hear*♪ It just has this wonderful melody of mystery. And yet, what it has underneath it is words of accountability; a prophetic word about how we live in this world. The continual threats of violence. The continual threats of war.

So, what do we do with this? What do we do with this? Do we hear it as an invitation to acknowledge where there is brokenness, where there is violence, where there is harm, where there is treachery? And in embracing that; in being able to name it and confess it, does it then invite us to say, “Let me come to the waters.”? Let me come to the waters as those people that John the Baptist preached to. Let me come to those waters as well and be renewed and receive those waters of baptism once again and be able to say, “God loves me enough to still pour upon me and wash me with those waters of baptism.” So, not only may I feel forgiven, but so then I can also say, “God can work within me to make me a new person.” I can say that, and when I am moving in my circles of influence in this world, where I live and breathe and have my being, I can start being one who works toward peace. I can be the one who brings a kind word. I can be the one who offers forgiveness to the person buried in their guilt. I can be the one who in some small way delivers hope and brings even the smallest bit of comfort and stillness.

That’s really where our realm of existence is most often located, within our own homes and our own communities. It’s the first place we can take that turn toward being more Christ-like, receiving the invitation to be God’s people in the world. So, this Advent season I challenge you to embrace the opportunity to confess. Because that invitation means God loves you enough to hear where you have gone astray. Also know in that invitation and in God’s hearing our confession, God loves you enough to say, “I can bring upon you waters of grace and waters of love and waters of healing,” so that you can then go and be that same presence of healing and grace in the lives of others.

Do you hear what I hear? Do you hear an invitation to Christ’s love? I pray that you do. Amen.