

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

A SERMON FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

DECEMBER 7, 2014

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

ISAIAH 40:1-11

MARIANNA, FLORIDA

MARK 1:1-8

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I suppose I should have entitled this sermon "Voices Crying In The Wilderness." The first voice is that of the prophet Isaiah and the second that of John the Baptist.

Isaiah is prophesying to a people who have been set free from captivity, who are coming home from Babylon, to rebuild their holy city, to rebuild their holy temple, and by so doing to usher in the age of the Messiah. They are literally preparing the way of the Lord.

Except they don't. I taught a lesson Wednesday evening on the prophet, Haggai, who may have been a contemporary of the one who uttered the words of Isaiah 40, or may have come along just a little later. In Haggai's time the people had been back fifteen years, and the temple wasn't even started. After he chastised them, and promised prosperity and that the king would be hailed as a messiah, they finished the temple in five years. But alas, the peace, prosperity, and messianic reign the prophet foretold did not happen, in no small part because the people could not get it straight that what the Lord God wanted from them was their worship, not their sacrifices, their love and devotion, not their fear and trembling, the offering of their first fruits and not their left-overs.

Isaiah sees a great highway built through the wilderness, sort of an I-10 from Babylon to Jerusalem over which the redeemed of the Lord, the righteous remnant, will march on their return to the place where they will make ready for the Messiah.

And the road didn't get built, either.

Mark casts John the Baptist in that role of the voice crying in the wilderness, but the way John is preparing isn't a highway, it is a way paved with hearts led to repentance, with people hungering and thirsting for righteousness, with people who are repenting of their sins.

If you look at the maps in the back of your Bibles at home, you'll find, as part of the Sinai Peninsula, an area designated as The Wilderness of Sin. Now of course, the word Sinai is derived from this root word, and it really has nothing to do with our sins and our transgressions.

But dear hearts, I believe that we, the world, humanity, today is wandering in that wilderness. We are wandering in the wilderness of sin. Some of the sins are more obvious. Turn on your television, pick up your newspaper, listen to your radio, go on Facebook or Twitter, and you will find that sin abounds.

The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City have brought the sin in which we are wandering to the forefront of our attention.

Michael Brown and Eric Garner were sinners. They deserved to be arrested, tried, convicted, imprisoned, and hopefully rehabilitated. The fact that they resisted arrest led to their violent deaths.

Much has been made of the fact that Michael Brown and Eric Garner were both black. What hasn't been focused upon was that they were both big, strong, men. Both over 300 pounds, one gets the impression that they were used to throwing that weight around. Did they deserve to die? No. Did they need to resist the authority of the law? No.

Their lives and their deaths are symptomatic of the sin in which we live, a wilderness of sin which includes the violence and looting in Ferguson and New York, the domestic violence and sexual assault stories that dominate our sports pages, the shoplifting and embezzlement and burglary and robbery and drug abuse that fill our front pages.

We live in a wilderness of sin. We are wandering in a wilderness of sin. But I recently heard a voice crying in the wilderness.

This voice is coming from one like Michael Brown or Eric Garner in some ways, in that he is young and big and black. His name is Benjamin Watson. He played football at the University of Georgia, and is now a New Orleans Saint. But he's not just a saint; he's a prophet, a voice crying in the wilderness. His Facebook post on the night that the Ferguson grand jury announced its decision to file no charges has gone viral. Maybe you've read it

But here is part of what Benjamin Watson wrote:

"...(U)ltimately, the problem is not a skin problem but a sin problem. Sin is the reason we rebel against authority. Sin is the reason we abuse our authority. Sin is the reason we are racist, prejudiced, and lie to cover our own sin. Sin is the reason we riot, loot, and burn. But I am encouraged because God has provided a solution for sin through his son Jesus and with it a transformed heart and mind. One that's capable of looking past the outward and seeing what's truly important in every human being. The cure for the Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner tragedies is not education or exposure. It's the Gospel. So finally, I'm encouraged, because the Gospel gives mankind hope."

That, dear friends, is a voice crying in the wilderness, a voice crying in the wilderness of sin, a voice that is like that of John the Baptist, calling the people of Judea to repentance, that is like that of Isaiah calling the people to come home to the holy place and worship God in spirit and in truth.

We are all sinners. .Michael Brown and Darren Wilson who shot him were sinners. Eric Garner and the officers who took him down in New York were sinners. The people rioting, looting, burning are sinners. Those of us reading the newspapers, watching the televisions, twittering, Facebooking, surfing the net, are sinners. Some of us sinners are angry over the sins of others. Some of us sinners are weeping over the sins of others. Some of us are weeping over our own sins.

Some of us like Benjamin Watson are voices crying in the wilderness of sin, calling the sinners to repentance, calling the exiled to come home, to come home to the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, who forgives sinners, who offers not only hope, but peace, an end to the violence, the racism, the greed, that corrupt our nation and that befoul our cities and our towns. A voice cries in the wilderness. Is it yours?

