

UN-FAVORABLE ODDS

THE POWERLESSNESS OF PROPHETS WITH PRINCIPALITIES & POWERS

A Homily first drafted for House Church,
Second Sunday of Advent, 2009

Text, for context: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as 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. Every 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

This was the week when we were all but swept up in the prurient curiosity of a sports idol's inability to drive his Escalade nearly as well as he can a golf ball down the fairway. It was almost too much to bear; what with spreading rumors suggesting he may, in fact, be as mortally imperfect as the rest of us duffers.

As if that wasn't bad enough, some are still recovering from the lingering news of Oprah leaving daytime TV in a couple years; her own remake of what might be dubbed, *The Long Goodbye*.

Meanwhile, on the Beltway social circuit, the media can't get enough of Tareq and Michael Salahi. Were the White House state dinner party crashers just another pair of pathetic down-n-out attention-seeking publicity hounds? Or was there some profoundly important reason for them to get all decked out, to play the part,

and seek to rub elbows with the powerful and influential elite?

We've all seen the film footage of the glamorous couple strutting past the cameras, then Michael flirting with the Marine guards, chumming it up with Joe the VP, and finally greeting the Leader of the Free World, with big smiles all around.

What I want to know is what she said to the Prez? What important message did she have to deliver?

I'll tell you, I've actually written the White House twice in the last week; once before Obama's Afghanistan speech on Tuesday, and the second email following it. I haven't heard back from him yet, so I'm wondering if he got the message.

If only I had the gumption of the Salahis. I had something urgent to share; something I thought was wise and helpful. I foresaw a bleak future for us as a people, as a nation. About a path in which we were about to embark amongst formidable mountains and valleys that once again appear to be crooked, and rough and wayward; rather than paths that are smooth and straight and level ...

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The common view of prophets, it seems to me, is not unlike that of fortune tellers, interpreters of signs and wonders, along with soothsayers, astrologers, palm readers and other charlatans; all predicting a future that is usually graphically portrayed as one of doom and gloom. In particular, what will happen if you don't shape up, be good, watch out, don't pout; 'cause someone's comin' to town. In this regard, I suppose you might even cast John the Baptist, along with his message, in with that bunch.

John has simultaneously been dubbed the last prophet of the Old Testament and the first prophet of the New Testament. AKA John the Forerunner, he's the one who goes on ahead and scouts out the lay of the land, the openness of hearts and minds, for what's to come. Get ready, get right, 'cause all your waiting and hoping is about to come to fruition. It's not a mixed message; though it gets a mixed reception, depending on who's going to get what, as a result.

In actuality, if we had been the first to hear John's message, we should not have been all that startled; that is, if we were faithful Jews who knew the Torah, as well as the ancient, unfulfilled prophecies filled with messianic expectation; like the one from Isaiah, which John simply reiterates. It's a message we would have heard before; passed down through the scripture tradition.

But it isn't so much the message, as it is the character of the messenger that may be the more important point to this story. And that point remains true to that same biblical tradition; about the unconventional way God seems to do things, the way the message gets delivered. Listen again to the context:

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, ... *the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*"

A wild-eyed religious rabble-rouser stumbles in from beyond the outer-markers of his society's accepted standards of power and authority, with what has instead been given to *him* to proclaim.

All that name-dropping with which Luke begins this passage is not about simply providing historical authenticity. The more important point is that proper channels are being circumvented, passed over, disregarded or rejected. And if I had been Tiberias, Pilate, Herod, Philip or Lysanias -- the real power brokers of the day -- I should have been offended; perhaps to the point of wanting nothing to do with a god of such riff-raff as John the Baptist and his ilk.

But why does such a God have the inclination -- if not a penchant -- for upsetting the apple cart, defying appropriate earthly authorities; and, time and again, leaving the most important things in the hands of the last and least among us? Why would God, our God, do that?

But why does God have the inclination – if not a penchant – for upsetting the apple cart, defying appropriate earthly authorities; and, time and again, leaving the most important things in the hands of the last and least among us? Why would God do that?

Here's what I think:

There seems to be a common affliction that besets those who find themselves in positions of power and authority, when it comes to human institutions. Symptoms can include hearing loss and tunnel vision, rigidity and inflexibility, and perhaps most of all, a hardening of the heart. What is considered the routine exercise of power often results in flexing one's muscles too much.

Other side effects are often reported. Expediency is mistaken for pragmatism; and preservation of the institution (and, in particular, its standard bearers at any particular moment) at all costs becomes the justification for the subtlest forms of insincerity and hypocrisy.

Though some might like to believe otherwise, I've discovered this condition seems to be just as true in ecclesiastical hierarchies as it is in social, governmental and political structures. It seems to be an occupational hazard.

Consequently – and as counter-intuitive as it may seem – the halls of power and authority are often the least likely place to usher in something authentically revelatory; precisely because it is the least likely place for something new to be well received. There's too much at stake, too much to lose.

On the other hand, when you've got little to lose, and everything to gain, you're ready to receive everything God has to give; without precondition, pretense or compromise.

So it was that, as Luke tells us, *“the word of God came to John in the wilderness.”*

I thought about all this the last couple days as I followed a story in the secular press about a gathering of Episcopalians in Los Angeles going through religious convulsions, as they elected not one, but two, women to be assistant bishops. Not only that, but one of them is an openly gay clergy person, in a committed relationship. She's a real, live, practicing lesbian, for God's sake.

Conventional thinking is these two actions will further fray and tatter the fabric of worldwide Anglican unity; as if its preservation was paramount.

I thought further about all this as I remembered an old friend to many of us, who was being ordained to the Episcopal diaconate yesterday, in San Francisco. Naomi is a woman whose own spiritual journey, long-standing faithfulness and vocational yearnings of the heart are things I'd been privileged to witness for many years. She was the last of several women over the years who sought sponsorship for holy orders while I was in my last parish.

I vividly recall the first one, Joanne, who joined the congregation in 1982, with the precondition I

first share with her my view on women's ordination.

“It's a non-issue for me,” I simply said.

“That's not good enough,” she shot back.

So I elaborated, “I don't believe gender is a deal breaker for priesthood. With regard to any vocation, if it's who you are, who you're called to be, that's the only issue.”

I could have elaborated further, based on my own personal experience, stating I could think of virtually nothing that was an automatic disqualifier. Time and again God opts for the outsider to deliver the word, and perceived losers to care for the lost. Why don't we?

Almost three decades later, some people in the Church are still quarreling over archaic institutional standards of “un-acceptableness;” along with a radically rigid and fractured view of scriptural authority. Those who are precisely in a position of power and authority to do otherwise, opt instead to preserve the safeguards of some petrified plan of salvation. All such nonsense would all be downright silly, if it weren't so sad.

And all the while, God proceeds instead to simply plant the Word in the wilderness; where the true heart of the matter can still be received and reside.

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In this sense, prophets are not so much about foretelling things to come, but things that have already come to pass – had we the ears to hear and eyes to see. Remember, John's message was the reiteration one first delivered centuries before; about a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth, a *way of the Lord* that has yet to come to fulfillment.

In doing so, of course, prophets pay a price. As an old professor of mine once taught me, they are “those who are willing to tell us, at the risk of our displeasure, the secrets of our hearts.”

So it was that John the Baptist, with little to lose, lost his head as well; and had it served up on a silver platter when he risked the displeasure of Herodias, Herod and Salome.

Conventional wisdom tells us, the institution always wins; particularly when the game is played on their turf, and they make all the rules. Betting on wilderness prophets -- and the message they risk everything to bring us -- the odds are clearly stacked against you.

There'd be little reason to go with such unfavorable odds, if it weren't the message. It's a message that comes to us *out of wilderness*, to dwell amongst us, if we only have the *powerlessness to receive him*.

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