

## **“Let Heaven and Nature Sing”**

(Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11)

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### **Nature Man**

This Sunday we lit the candle for Joy! And so let's go to this morning's Gospel which focuses on the person who seems like the ultimate kill-joy, John the Baptist. He is not one for the niceties of civilization, always too frank, with his harsh criticisms. No wonder he is in prison. But if we can get past the fact that he is so uncouth, we find that he plays an important role in our faith. He is like a mother who shouts to her child not to touch the hot stove. But his significance goes well beyond this.

One of the important thing to recognize about John the Baptist is that he is a nature man. He is uncouth, excessively hairy and clothed in animals skins. He probably didn't smell too good either. By choice, he lived in the wilderness, on the fringe of society. And it was from there he delivered his message to whoever was brave enough to come out looking for him.

According to Jesus, John is more than a prophet. He is a messenger for the divine – and his role is to be a “pointer”; to point the people in the direction of a future “greatness”. Jesus tells the crowd gathered around him that those who arrive at the destination to which John is pointing,

will be even greater than John himself. They will share in the greatness that Jesus himself fully embodies.

### **An Important Question**

But as Jesus speaks of John the Baptist, he is also asking the crowd an important question, a question worth asking ourselves too. And that question is “Why are you here?” And he also helps us out by answering the question, with what might be the best possible answer.

Jesus asks the crowd, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? Did you come out to see a reed shaking in the wind? Possible translation: Did you just come out here for no particular reason?”

Or perhaps a deeper translation would be: “Why did you get out of bed on a cold morning and brave the elements to come to here, to this place? It is, after all, a place that many people today don’t even want to enter; a place they are afraid of, a place where jackals and wolves in the form of religious fanatics lurk in waiting, so stuck in the past that it is a wilderness barren of meaning for today’s world. You could have stayed under warm blankets or basked in your soft and royally comfortable bathrobe all morning.

And when you were ready, you could have reached over for the remote and turned on the TV and watched newscasters with perfect delivery speak to you in the most entertaining ways, telling you only what you want to hear. And then perhaps you could have gotten a nice cup of coffee and listened to some perfectly sung tunes by your favorite professional musicians on your CD player.

So why did you come here? Here you are likely to be harangued by a shaky “reed” standing behind the pulpit, through a sometimes shaky microphone. Why listen to someone not even close to being as polished or entertaining a communicator as your average TV personality, who often says things that are hard on the ears? And there is no way the choir can match the CD’s at home.

Did you leave the world of what most people are doing, to come out for this? Many in recent years have themselves been like a marsh of reeds clacking together disapprovingly in the wind over what they have seen and heard before turning away.

No, says Jesus, you got out of bed and came here because you want to experience something that you feel is essential to your being, something real and **great**. It is something that somehow doesn’t penetrate your life when you are wrapped in the cocoon of living and

behaving in society like everybody else does. You want to be moved by a prophetic word or vision, that is authentic and raw, that converts you from being half alive to being fully alive.

When you turn on the TV at home and hear something, and it sounds like it might be right, and you are willing to go along with it, that's not it. The repeating narratives that come out of the TV, from people who know you will believe it, if they say it enough times, has no power to deliver that essential experience. If they move us, it is only partially and briefly. None of it delivers that deep down gushing up of joy and purpose that we seek.

What we seek and hunger for is real conversion. Where something incredibly good and powerful penetrates the cocoon we live in and runs our hearts through and through, like a sword of terrifying beauty and grace; that leaves us fully exposed and yet fully alive and full of sacred purpose.

That is why I think even the rigorously religious Pharisees and Saducees must have gone out into the wilderness to see John. They somehow knew that what they needed in order to be real, could not be found in the comfortable cocoon of their daily lives in town. It had to come from a place separated from the world they normally lived in.

And I think that a good reason to go to church is because we need that separation and that experience too. We need the real Jesus; not the TV Jesus or the establishment Jesus. We don't need a Jesus who has been neutralized by a society that purports to be designed solely for our comfort and safety. We don't want to half-live and die in a cocoon. We want to be metamorphized and turned into butterflies by the real and hair-raising Jesus who comes straight to us out of the mystery that lies beyond all that. It is he who comes to us on Sunday mornings and says "get up, take up your mat and walk."

And when we have made the effort to literally step out of our daily lives and are finally before that one, the one in whom we can fully trust, we are finally feel free to do what I believe all of us most want to do, and that is, to surrender our hearts completely to the goodness and greatness that we know he delivers.

Before that one alone we can feel free to say; "Kill me! Drive the sword of your love deep into my heart, cut it in half and fill it with yours, so that I can feel your presence in me - from the top of my head to the ends of my toes. Do this to me, so that I can leave all my pettiness behind and my life can be full with a lasting joy and a lasting sense of

purpose, so that I too may be forever moved to do good things; making way, where ever I go, for your greatness and love.”

Unless we have that experience, I fear that we are doomed to walk the long road of mediocrity, only half alive, until our batteries run out and we drop dead.

### **A heart pierced by love for Nature**

On this Sunday, in which the readings point us in the direction of deep joy, it strikes me as interesting that John who is pointing us to that joy is also the Bible’s ultimate nature man. And it strikes me that the way joy is expressed in this morning’s scripture is through savoring the ways in which God gives us life through nature.

Isaiah prophesies:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing...

...The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;... the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water...

...And the ransomed of the Lord shall ... come ...with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; ... and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

I would imagine that John the Baptist, living as he did in the wilderness, might have been especially appreciative of these words. He would have known that even in a barren wilderness, the hand of God's blessing through nature would be apparent. Perhaps he too witnessed moments when hot dry sands turned to pools and the wilderness came to life.

It is hard to know what nature meant to people who lived between 2000 and 2500 years ago, when our Bible readings were written. They could not possibly have understood how we relate to it today; how AC, central heating or electric lighting effects the way we experience it. They could not have understood how supermarkets have separated us from the experience of tilling the soil or that we today would have the power to destroy entire ecosystems.

And so it seems to me a powerful testament to the never-ending relevance of scripture, that these readings do such a beautiful job of reminding us of the essential connection between our spiritual and physical well-being and the well-being of the earth.

James reminds us of the total dependency of the farmer on rain. And Isaiah, by the way it interweaves the promise of salvation with a vision of nature's rebirth, reminds us that our experience of God and the joy that arises within us is inextricably an "earthly" experience.

These passages speak down to us over 2000 years and more, telling us that, as far as this life is concerned, our spiritual wholeness comes from experiencing earth in a heavenly way or, you could say, glimpsing heaven in an earthly way.

We need our salvation to be much more than just a proposition or an idea. We don't need a salvation that is about floating around in a disembodied world of ideas and fears. We need it to be a full-bodied experience that makes every cell in our bodies feel alive and that grounds us in our experience of the earth and all that is in it, while at the same time discovering in the same experience a powerful sense of God's presence everywhere, and in a way that gives our every step meaning and purpose. Talk about experiencing greatness! And more wonderful still is that it is an experience available to anyone, even the most humble; perhaps especially the most humble.

And a direct result of this kind of experience, I think, must be a relationship with the natural world that is marked by respect. A conversion that is felt so deeply as a celebration of the earth coming to life, cannot justify thoughtlessly manipulating or trashing it; because those who have experienced conversion in this deep way, must know that everything that exists was created to participate somehow in the same joy and deliverance.

So I think that one good answer to the question “Why are we here?” is because, we don’t just want to be saved superficially. We want our salvation to be real, so that we can live fully, body and soul as part of the beauty that God has provided for us.

I think it is good that we make this connection between joy and earthly experience now. So that we may remember, when the Savior comes on Christmas Eve, why he is born into the most earthly of settings, in a stable. That too, will be a sign for us that heaven has chosen the earthly in which to dwell, so that in caring for what is earthly, we too might come to dwell in heaven, for now and ever more.

Einstein once said that there are only two ways to live, as though nothing is a miracle or as though everything is a miracle.