



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

***The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida***

The First Sunday

After Epiphany

The Baptism of the Lord

JANUARY 7, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

John the Baptist was a prophet, probably the last true prophet before Christ. And don't we love prophets? They remind us of where we have gone wrong. And they are typically quite zealous and very insistent that we pay attention. Not only do they remind us of how human we are, how prone to failure we can be, but they also demand that we straighten up and fly right – or in Biblical terms – repent. Often with the subtlety of the proverbial two-by-four to the side of the head. And they always begin with something like “Thus, says the Lord,” which means we really should not ignore them. So, of course, we love prophets. Sure we do.

If I were to preach prophetically this morning by, for example, applying our Christian faith and Episcopal ethos to a major public policy, dare I say political, issue, like gun violence or immigration reform, the groans and sighs in the pews would be audible. Go ahead, deny it. I have lived on both sides of that equation, in the pews and in the pulpit. Wait 'til October when we tell you how to vote, though not who to vote for. Nothing like being a prophet to win friends and influence people. Nothing is more troubling to people than being called out for their poor performance. Because that is what prophets do. They impose a fierce accountability on us. That's why prophets like John the Baptist end up with their heads on a platter.

And yet where would we be without prophets? How would live our lives if we never could be held accountable for our behavior? Look at the people who have had the money and/or power to sidestep accountability for their actions. How many do great harm just out of even the mistaken belief that they somehow are insulated from accountability or consequence for their actions? How many of them do we really admire?

We know better. We know we are accountable. And, fortunately, we are surrounded by prophetic voices to remind us, and not just the prominent voices that demand reform on a national stage. Think of the mutual accountability in the parent child relationship. The mother is accountable to the child in her womb. The father is accountable to the mother. Then at the child's birth both parents become accountable to the child for its upbringing, a major aspect of which is teaching the child to be accountable initially to

them, but as they grow older to teachers and employers, and their entire communities.

Spouses similarly are accountable to each other. Those who know us best are our best prophets. Or as some wag posted on Facebook the other day, “our best friends are the ones who will walk down the street beside us.” They know us well. They love us and want what is best for us. And that usually involves coloring within the lines. At times that may seem like a curse, but isn’t it really a blessing? Let’s face it. We all need someone – or two or three someones – to remind us where the lines are and nudge us back inside them from time to time.

The prophetic voices of those who know and love us seem to me indispensable to our living the lives we know we should be living.

And to me that is the key to a prophet’s value in our lives, whether notable figures in our nation or communities or a singular bff who never fails to hold up the mirror for us to see what we really are up to. To remind us who we really are and what we want most in our heart of hearts. Because deep in our hearts and in the depths of our souls we yearn for that reminder of who we are and what we are called to do.

Prophets gain our ear when they are authentic and humble and Godly in their life and words. It is not so much what they eat or what they wear or where they live, though John the Baptist did have a distinctive aura about him that lent him credibility. And admittedly, a self-proclaimed prophet in an Armani suit and Gucci shoes sporting a Rolex watch might engage a hermeneutic of suspicion rather than rapt attention. It is the touch of the divine in the prophet and in ourselves that creates the connection that makes us listen.

When we say Christ is in our hearts, when we say he is in us and we are in him, when we acknowledge that we all are children of God, we see an unalterable and unbreakable connection with the prophet who tells us just what we want and need to hear whether we know it or not. Deep down, we know how to be good, and we want to get better at it. That’s how we were created. That’s the essence of our being. It’s in our spiritual DNA. We are hard-wired to be good. And a good prophet’s message always will resonate with that part of us.

Often the message will be challenging, even daunting. Or maybe just inconvenient or uncomfortable. But the prophet’s message is not to change who we are, but to change our direction. To repent. To walk away from the

superficial glitter of sin and evil and Godlessness and live as the image of God we are and the imitators of Christ we are called and destined to be.

Prophets are then just the human guardrails on our journeys of life. Their voices, large or small, are a gift from God put in our path to save us from taking a wrong turn. Sometimes their voices, like John the Baptist's, are shrill and grating, even off putting. Sometimes they are no more intrusive than the tender whisper of a loving friend or, perhaps, an angel in our midst. But throughout history prophets have been an essential instrument of God's involvement in creation and relationship with humanity.

And as Jesus would say from time to time, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen." And we all have ears.