**Sermon 12-16-18**

**Paul Purdue preaching**

*“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Don’t say, ‘Hey, my name is on the church role.’ God can grow baptismal certificates like leaves on the magnolias outside our church. No!  Live differently.”* Who preaches like that? Who comes to that church?

Tom Laney, a Nashville based church spiritual leadership guru asserts: *“Nowhere in the Bible can you find a prophet who served as a local church pastor or resident rabbi.”* One might argue that Moses was a local church pastor, but Aaron was the pastor and Miriam the song leader. Others might call the Apostle Paul a pastor, but Paul preached, got arrested, and left churches under the care or Phoebe, Priscilla, or Lydia. Jesus? Jesus traveled from village to village preaching, healing, and making local spiritual leaders mad!

Who can endure weekly sermons that scrub our souls raw? Who greets their guests: *“you brood of vipers”*?  We might enjoy greetings that go “those brooding of republican vipers” or “that bunch of democratic snakes.” Labeling others “those liberals” or “those evangelicals” lets skewer our opponents and  serve ourselves self-righteous comfort food. Growing up my Baptist pastor warned us: *“If you’re thinking about what your neighbor, or your spouse or your sister ought to do, then it’s unlikely you are hearing from God.*” The prophets confront, challenge, and correct us!

Without the prophetic voice, churches slip into a cultural comfort zone.  In an era of “meeting needs” our churches may grow numerically while easing away from the prophetic fire. The prophets burn away our unspoken materialism, political idolatry and self-serving dross. It knocks us to our knees and bows our heads. The prophetic voice shines God’s searing surgical light upon us, cutting us to the bone. The pastoral voice takes our hands and raises us up to walk in newness of life.

Today we consider the prophet John, whose prophetic voice thunders within the context of a time and place. John the Baptist’s story opens: “*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler… during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”* Some see Luke’s list of names as just historical time stamps, but Luke closes John’s story noting: “B*ut Herod, the ruler who had been rebuked by John,…added to all the evil things he had done, by shutting up John in prison*,” IN ORDER to SHUT HIM UP! Luke 1:5 begins the Gospel saying, *“in the days of King Herod*…” The beloved Nativity begins, “*A decree went out from Caesar Augustus.*” Let us always remember that an unholy alliance of politicians and priests crucified Jesus.

The prophetic voice challenges us to think about: “what should we do in this particular time and place to serve God?” When we regulate faith to *“the sweet bye and bye”,* making theology more about heaven than our actions today, we are not living like Jesus, who taught us to pray, love, and do “*on earth as in heaven.”*

Marcus Borg tells us that we cannot understand Jesus or Paul apart from the image of the Kingdom of God. You see the Kingdom of God always stands in judgment over the kingdoms of this world. Borg says, “*Paul’s proclamation of Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Saviour directly countered Roman Imperial theology…. Jesus was Lord and the emperor was not! “Jesus is Lord” was high treason!... (The)message challenged the normalcy of civilization, then and now, with an alternative vision of how life on earth can and be.*”  (The First Paul Borg & Crossin)

Jesus and the prophets stir things up. Our faith is not just about received traditions and theology. Yes, a holy wind blows behind us, pushing us along, lifting us up and easing our journey. However, the same Winds of the Spirit that ease our passage today, once  flipped over tables, set aside old rules, welcomed those ruled unclean, and broke down comfortable diving walls. Lead by the Spirit we study, pray, and think! Faith without reason worships rules and bottles the Spirit. An unthinking Faith crucifies the prophets, proudly standing stiff-necked against God’s renewing wind.

 It is comforting to know a nice bible story or verse.  Faith applies those insights into our lives ! It is nice to know John called people to repent- faith produces repentance today. It is helpful to know John was arrested for opposing an evil king,  but faith asks “what does that story teach us today?”

Perhaps in 2018, we need to hear John’s warning about trusting old recipes and rules within our context: *“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor… live differently!’*Would John’s words sting a bit more if we changed the words a bit: “*Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Jesus as our Savior… practice a faith that makes a difference in this world.’*”

 Authentic faith asks, “What should we do right now? What should we do with our time? What should we do with our money? How do we love neighbors? How do we welcome strangers? How do Jesus’ ethics guide us? What will we do for those at our border or along life’s margins?” It is not enough to cite some verses or profess a few beliefs!  Real faith impacts our thinking and living. Faith without thoughtful engaging ethics is dead.

Faith is not about the peaceful easy feeling Jesus gives! Spirituality is not simply about having our hearts strangely warmed or achieving a deep mystic connection with the love of God. As wonderful as faith, hope, and love can feel, love always acts to change behavior in this world, not the next. Some name John Wesley as the source today’s over emphasis on personal salvation. Wesley spoke of the love of God being poured into our hearts. Some call this romantic theology, God’s However,  *God’s love was not comfort food for Wesley, but fuel to live life of righteousness, justice and good deeds. .*

In 1739, John Wesley began ordering Methodist daily life around some General Rules. Wesley echoes John the Baptist saying, “*there is only one condition required: a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from our sins.  Wherever this desire is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue that they should continue to (give) evidence of their faith by doing good in every way possible!” F*aith is not about reciting ancient stories or bathing in warm feelings, but about: What should we do right now.

Consider the heart of our General Rules: *feed the hungry, clothe the naked, avoid drunkenness, avoid quarrelling, never hold slaves, provide healthcare, advocate for prisoners, teach, encourage, evangelize, preach, always speak with charity, avoid railing against government officials, pay taxes, never lay up earthly treasures, avoid self-indulgence, don’t buy lavish attire, help people find work, don’t be a slick salesperson, hire church members, help others in business, be frugal, be patience, do good, be kind, be merciful, unmask cheap grace, keep the sabbath free from ordinary work, make worship your top priority, take communion often, pray with others, practice private prayer, search the scriptures, fast and abstain.*Our General Rules offer practical ethics. They call us to think about the details of our daily life in light of God’s calling! They are about living in this world more than the next.

Upon hearing John thunder, “*Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Change the way you live right now!” The crowds asked, “What should we do?”* John does not answer “*believe this or that.”*  No John speaks to life today! *“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and the same goes with food or shelter. Be honest in business. Be more than just fair- be just! Do not extort. Never threaten or make false accusations. Be satisfied with your wages.*” Our ethics matter!  We must think!

However, John was not beheaded for preaching personal ethics. Jesus was not crucified for healing but for loving too many folks. If we only practice personal ethics, we have only focused on half of God’s Great Commandment. It is not enough to love God and be good. No, Jesus commands that “*we love neighbors as ourselves”.* Love speaks up for our neighbors, strangers, and opponents. Love shakes our self-interest. Love cares what happens to the least, the last and the lost!

The kingdom of God always challenges, corrects, and casts down injustice, oppression, and evil. Love breaks down our self-interest. Love speaks up for neighbors, strangers and opponents. When the love of God warms our hearts, it sets ablaze a love for all people. Love recasts our living for the betterment of others.  Love gives away it’s extra coat, feeds people, provides healthcare, visits prisons, helps people find work….

So this morning, being more of a pastor than a prophet, I ask you to deeply ponder the question:” What should I do? What should we do? What does it mean to be a Christian in 2019? What do I have to share? Who might I better love? What self-righteous comforts might the prophetic voice scrub out of my soul?” And Friends, may God’s love so strangely warm our hearts, that we do not fear risking failure, as we spend our lives building on-earth- as-in-heaven. Amen.