

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

December 4, 2016 – Second Sunday of Advent

## **The Prophet's Cry**

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. – Isaiah 11:1-9*

*Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near! – Matthew 3:1-12*

One of the things I hope you will hear from me fairly frequently is about the importance of imagination in the spiritual life. I am not one of those who think that our faithfulness can be measured by obedience alone, as if the will of God is always really clear, and all we need to do is accept it. Often, I find, those who think the will of God is really clear, are a bit murky about where God's will differs from their own.

Rather, I think what faithfulness means is to employ all our faculties, in playful exploration of how ancient teachings might give new life to our spirits. One Jewish practice I really like is the practice of creatively retelling Biblical stories, bringing the Biblical stories to life by reimagining them for each new generation. While every sermon is an act of creative imagination, this morning, rather than a traditional sermon, I thought I would tell you a story, and I invite you to imagine with me what might have attracted all those first century Judeans out into the wilderness to experience John's baptism.

“Grandmother, what does it mean to be great?” My grandmother paused from grinding barley and looked at me with her piercing gaze. “Why do you ask?” she asked. One of my grandmother's most annoying habits was to answer a question with a question. But I had been through this enough times that I had to address the question. “Because I keep hearing about a prophet who wants to ‘make Judea great again’ but I don't know what it means to be great!

My grandmother nodded, looked at me for another moment, and then went back to grinding grain. And when she did that, I smiled. Most of the time,

when I asked my grandmother questions, she would act annoyed and give me a quick answer. When she did that, I knew that she thought the question was too easy. But every now and then, I would ask her a question that she had to think about for a while. These were what she called the “questions for the ages,” because, she said, “if you don’t get the answers right, you will be sorry for ages and ages.” So I tried to ask her less easy questions, and more difficult questions, and when she didn’t answer me right away, I knew I had asked what she thought was a question worth thinking about.

The rest of the day passed quietly. I watched my grandmother’s face closely, and could tell she was thinking carefully. It wasn’t until after supper that I saw her face relax and the hint of a smile play around her eyes, and knew that she had settled on an answer. I sat up and leaned forward, but she didn’t say anything, and I went to bed that night without an answer to my question.

Early the next morning, so early that it still seemed like the middle of the night, she woke me up, told me to roll up my blanket, and handed me a water bladder to carry. “Come,” she said. “You want to know what greatness is? Let’s see if we can find it!” She set out towards the east, and as we climbed out of the village and over the ridge, I realized where she was taking me: into the Judean wilderness, where within a few miles, the farm fields gave way to the barrenness of sand and stone, and beyond, down, down, down to the river .

We walked in silence for about an hour, and then quite suddenly, she asked, “If you were to find greatness, how would you recognize it?” When grandmother asked a question like that, I knew what she was looking for. She wanted me to recite something from the Torah or the prophets. And she didn’t like it when I was vague. She wanted precision, accuracy. So I thought for a few moments to make sure I had it right in my head: “*A shoot shall grow from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots,*” I recited. It was a description of the ideal king from the prophet Isaiah. My grandmother smiled and I knew I was on the right track, so I went on. “*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of ...*”

“Yes, yes,” my grandmother interrupted, “but what is wisdom? What is understanding?” This was unusual. She normally wanted me to recite these verses without stopping. But this time she wanted to talk about each word, and she didn’t want a definition like the teachers who drilled us in the synagogue. She knew I could give those definitions easily enough. She wanted to know who I thought showed each of those characteristics. And she wanted me to name names, names from our own village! We could never have had this talk at home, where all our neighbours would be listening in. “Who had wisdom and understanding, the rabbi, the midwife? Who had steadfast courage: the thug who beat up people for the tax collector or the village elder who organized the resistance? When did the two big landowners in our village show justice for the poor?” And several times, when I ventured to suggest that someone was wise or a fool, she would caution me not to rush to judgment too quickly. “Don’t judge by appearances,” she would quote back at me. “Don’t judge by hearsay.” And then she would gently ask me about one of the poor, a person I had never thought of as important before, but when I thought about it had exactly the quality we were discussing.

It wasn’t long before I realized that my grandmother’s goal on this journey was more than just a destination. She wanted to have a really long talk, because she thought the question required nothing less. And it was a really long talk. It took us hours to get there, and over the course of the journey, I came to see that everyone I knew, myself included, were complex mixtures of wisdom and foolishness, courage and cowardice, knowledge and ignorance. “Grandmother,” I asked at one point, “does that mean that a wise person is the one who knows that wisdom belongs to God alone?” That brought the broadest smile I think I have ever seen from my grandmother. By the time we reached the river, I was much better prepared to assess whether the one we had gone to see was worth the trip.

On the way back, she asked me what I saw. “He was dressed like the prophet Elijah, in clothes made of camels’ hair.” That seemed to satisfy her. She asked me what I heard. “He was challenging us to live better, to live with moral integrity.” That brought a grunt of assent. She asked me why I thought he baptized people. I had to think about that one a little. I remembered the story of how the people of Israel had spent forty years wandering in the wilderness before they were ready to cross the Jordan

into the promised land. “Is he asking us to reenter the promised land and start again?” My grandmother thought that was a good question.

Then she asked me why I thought we had to go out into the wilderness to see him. “Why didn’t he come to us? Why wasn’t he in Jerusalem?” By now I had realized that my grandmother was asking questions that she didn’t herself have the answers to, questions that she thought were worth pondering, questions she thought were questions for the ages. “Why do we have to go off the beaten path to find the new thing God is doing? Why do the prophets appear in the unfamiliar places, the unexpected places?” And I decided that in the face of a question for the ages, I would heed her lesson and take my time to answer. She seemed satisfied with that.

As we reached the summit of the last ridge, we stopped for a moment to watch the sun set over our village below. It was then that I asked again the question that had prompted this memorable journey: “Grandmother, is he the one to make Judea great again?”

And, strangely, for once she answered the question: “I thought the wisest thing he said was in pointing beyond himself, to one whose sandals he was not worthy to carry. I am always suspicious of those who make too much of themselves.”

Grandmother was not often so forthcoming, so I persisted, “So do you think he is the one we have been waiting for?”

“We will have to see,” she said. “There are so many conflicts in this land. No one listens to each other. No one seems interested in learning from each other. We will have to see whether he can get the wolf and the lamb to live together in peace. We will have to see.”