

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

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1 Samuel 3:1-10

Luke 3:1-6

We saw last week that when we think of advent we should think of God coming, because God did not only come at Christmas – although he came supremely and most tangibly then, but it has always been God's pattern, to come to his people to come to his creation, to be with us in life and death and beyond. And although there have been times when people have known God's voice and presence directly, with no mediator, as it were, most often God has come through people who have learned to listen to and for him. We call them prophets, and they are very much a mixed bag in terms of background etc.

The first prophet was Samuel, whose call we read about this morning. He was a special child, born as the result of prayer and dedicated to live in God's presence all his life. He was, at the time of his call, a tabernacle apprentice. Later in life he seems less tied to working at the tabernacle, but he spent his early years there, where there might have been fewer distractions to keep him from listening to God. But where too he would see the whole picture of life lived in God's service, with holy Eli and his less than holy sons.

Later we meet Elijah: he comes from nowhere. He is known as Elijah the Tishbite, which meant that he was a foreigner, who God chose to use.

Elisha his successor was a farmer, whom Elijah found when he was ploughing the fields.

More at home in the royal courts we find first Isaiah, who is one of the court prophets, and possibly part of the aristocracy himself. And after him, Jeremiah, called by God in his youth, and leading a life of danger and adventure because he spoke out in dangerous times.

All we know of Ezekiel is that he was an exile from his land, like so many at his time in history, so he had a common experience with the people he spoke to, and perhaps a more vivid imagination – he is the prophet who casts God's word in the most bizarre imagery.

Amos tells us – or rather tells those who use the word “prophet” derisively to undermine him – that he thinks of himself more as a pruner of sycamore figs and shepherd, but that in that calling God called him to speak.

Hosea is a man about whom all we really know is that he was married and that his marriage was troublesome, important to him and in the end became symbolic.

John the Baptist, the last of the prophets before Jesus, came of a priestly family and gave up the expectation to speak God’s word in a liturgical setting – for priestly sons usually followed their fathers – so that he could speak the more radical and cutting words of the prophet, the words which he heard God saying to him.

We don’t know what the background of other prophets was because what is remembered is their words and sometimes their actions. All we know of them as people is what you might record on a gravestone – name, family and place of birth or of work. But what they all had in common was that they were prepared to listen to God, they were open to God coming to them. They learned to expect to hear God. From reading the story of Samuel’s call, as well as reading some other things, like Elijah realising God was not in the earthquake or the wind or the fire, we are shown that they were not born hearing God, but they would have to learn it one way or another. They had to learn to listen, or to see or to taste, or smell, or to touch God.

In doing this they were unusual, though not as unusual as we or even they might think. Elijah, when he felt that he was truly under the harrow, complained to God that he was the only true servant of God who was left. But God reassured him that there were yet seven thousand others in Israel who had not compromised their faith which meant their faithfulness.

But the prophets, who listened to and perceived God were always the minority and the still are. In a famous verse the poet Elizabeth Barret Browning said this:

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

Advent is God coming to us. God is coming as much now as he was all these centuries ago, but still it is those who listen and look and expect and reflect and think and pray who are most likely to perceive him. If we make much of the prophets at this time of the Christian year – because of course some of them spoke words which later seem best fulfilled by the coming, life and death of Jesus – we should remember that they were only able to speak these words because they were listening, they had learned to listen; and it would not have been any easier for them to do this then than it is for us now. But if we were to take the trouble to practice our listening and if we were to listen and look, what might we see and hear of the God who comes to us?

The world needs prophets – people who will help others to see and hear God. The world needs people who will speak God’s truth: the truth that God loves us; the truth that is the way of the beatitudes, that we should be humble and embrace sorrow and suffering, so that God’s love and light may better shine through. And the calling to bring God close to others, which was the calling of the prophets is also the calling of all God’s people, not of each one individually – though of some individuals – but of God’s people being and working together. This is what is meant by the commonly (well, in church terms, commonly) heard phrase “the priesthood of all believers.” It doesn’t mean that each of us is our own priest, but that all believers are together priests – and you could also say prophets – to the world.

Because the world needs prophets. It needs people and bodies of people who speak the truth and who live the truth and who act out the truth in ways that people notice. It needs people like Hosea, who allow their personal life to speak of God’s love. It needs people like Amos who goes to the neighbouring land to speak and people like Jeremiah who speaks to his own people. It needs people with vivid imaginations, like Ezekiel and people who give up on their inheritance like John the Baptist. It needs the young like Samuel and the old, like aged Simeon blessing the baby Jesus in the temple. The world needs us to show and tell what God is like and why it matters. God comes to us. The world needs to know that and needs to know the God who comes.

The advent music is full of longing. “O Come, O come Emmanuel” it sighs. And “Wait for the Lord, his day is near.” And “Come, thou Long-expected Jesus, born to set your people free.” It is full of longing, and for some Advent is an easier time to live with than Christmas. Christmas is about joy and beginnings and new life, but for some of us, longing speaks more to our experience. Longing for change, longing for relief, longing for unequivocally good news. Christmas is all these things, of course, but we live still in an imperfect world and the good news of Christmas is very soon overlaid with the sorrows and worries of life in the now. And so we understand the longing.

And if we, who live with faith, understand the longing of Advent, the longing, ultimately, for God, then how much more must the world outside of faith and faithfulness feel it? And how much more relevant is the prophetic message that we are given to bring – that God comes: Christ has come, Christ still comes, and Christ will come again.

We saw last week that the end goal of this life is to live with God in the New Jerusalem, which will come down to us from the place of God. But not every step we take on the road there will look triumphant and assured. As prophets of God, this is particularly true. The best Christians and the best witnesses to God are not those who sail calmly through life with nothing to trouble them – if indeed such people truly exist. The best Christians are those who allow life to batter them, but still radiate their trust in God. And they are most often not those whom the world thinks of as successful, with influence or money or comfort. They are the ordinary people, the hurting people, the people who struggle to make ends meet, financially or

emotionally. Sometimes they are the crazy people. But always they are the loving trusting people. To them and through them to others, God comes.

So this time of longing, this advent season, let us live as prophets of God, learning to listen and discern God's presence and God's word and living it out with our whole beings, whatever that means. And let us pray that to us and through us to others God will come. Amen.