

The lessons from today's teaching highlight the roles of two prophets in the Jesus story during this time of Advent. From the Gospel of Matthew, we have Jesus proclaiming the greatness of John the Baptist – the voice crying out in the wilderness – and his prophetic role of preparing the way for the incarnation of God in Jesus.

It was from the wilderness that God chose to announce that the reign of justice and peace was coming in the form of God's Son and that repentance is the way to salvation. This astounding proclamation did not come through the temple but instead through the desert air. And it didn't come from a ruler or a priest. It came from the one who wore weird clothes and had a strange diet. It came from the outlier living in the desert and listening to God. It came from John the Baptist.

John sounds the clarion call to repent, to take a good look at ourselves and get ourselves straight. His charge echoes Psalm 51: *Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.* He says that we have work to do to be truly ready for Divine incarnation. It is my view that this incarnation is not just a single event with one person – Jesus, but the continual incarnation of God within all of us and all living things.

Advent is indeed a time to wait and watch and pray, and that is important work. But there is other work to do – the work of clearing the way – to make a straight pathway for the incarnation of God into our hearts. The litanies for Advent in the Benedictine Breviary that we use at our Community of Divine Love House of Prayer include these petitions:

Prepare a way in our hearts for your saving Word.

Bring low the mountains of our pride and raise up the valleys of our weakness.

Break down the walls of hatred among nations and make smooth the ways that lead to peace.

This is the work that John the Baptizer is exhorting us to – the work of cultivating the kingdom of heaven that is within us.

The teaching from Luke speaks of another prophet. The Magnificat is Mary's song of praise to God for looking upon her with so much favor that she is anointed as the one who will bring from her womb the infant Jesus – the incarnation of God into the world. She is known as *Theotokos*, meaning God Bearer.

Mary is often portrayed as a meek and humble servant of God, and that may be true. But she is also so much more. Mary is a prophet in her own right, a prophet of peace and justice. As the story goes, Young Mary set out to visit her cousin Elizabeth, knowing that she, like herself, was pregnant. Upon her arrival, as she drew nearer to her cousin, Elizabeth's unborn child began leaping in divine joy. What a moment that must have been. On that day, not only did the unborn John leap with excitement, but so did the mothers. I can only imagine the look on their faces, bursting with joy.

Mary was so ecstatic that she began to shout out her song that would become known as *The Magnificat*. She sang out praise to God. She sang out of gratitude and grace. She sang out in humility. And in that moment, she became a prophet. She was speaking about the reign of God, and how that reign of justice will be brought forth through her child. Her song is one of praise and prophecy and is also nothing less than a political manifesto.

The proud will be scattered in their conceit. The mighty will be cast down from their thrones and the lowly raised up. The hungry will be filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. Mary was turning things upside down before Jesus was even born. One must wonder if Jesus heard these words from within the womb.

We will only know true justice has been accomplished not when the privileged among us know it, but when the most marginalized and vulnerable know it. When those who struggle most – the prisoners, the immigrants, refugees, victims of violence, the homeless, the hungry, and our LGBTQ brothers and sisters gain justice, then it will be real.

Mary knew that the infant that would burst from her womb was the human and divine instrument of God's mercy and justice, and that is good news for every marginalized person in the world both then and now.

If the stories and words of the Mary and John resonate with you, it is because these truths, this courage, this prophetic power also lives within all of us. Because we are all called to announce the good news of God. We are called to not only clear the way for God in our own hearts but also help others prepare themselves as well. We are all called to be Theotokos – the bearers of God in the world. We are all called to be Mary, and we are all called to be John the Baptist.

As Ricard Rohr says, “We are all the second coming of Christ.”

Our Book of Common Prayers says that we are to proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ; seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. Doesn't that sound a lot like John and Mary?

What does it mean for us to say, as Mary said: *Let it be with me according to your word*? What does it mean for our voice to be the one crying out in the wilderness of our world today? What does it mean to be prophets of our own time?

The words spoken from Zachariah to his newborn son John the Baptist are also for us:

*And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way,
to give God's people the knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

So be it.

O Come Emmanuel