

Hear the Angels Sing
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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12:11

“Hear the Angels Sing” Pilgrim Church UCC Homily Outline, Second Sunday of Advent
(Matthew 3:1-12) December 4, 2016

John in the Wilderness

-The holy season of Advent moves from an apocalyptic Gospel text last week to John calling people “broods of vipers” and telling them to repent out in the Wilderness this week.

-After being in the waters of the Jordan and experiencing the Wilderness as it looks in the Holy Land today, I have a new respect and appreciation for what John the Baptist was symbolically doing here.

-John was focused on repentance and bringing about a whole new relationship with God, inviting people to leave their burdens behind by confessing their sins and being baptized to be made new somehow.

-In order to go there, it required taking a journey into the Wilderness (the barren eastern slopes of the Judean mountains that face the Dead Sea and the lower Jordan valley.) That journey wasn’t easy physically let alone emotionally. John challenges the sincerity of people making this journey.

-It’s almost as if John’s saying don’t come here because I’m a spectacle and you want to see the show, come into these waters because you sincerely want to turn your life around and start living a life devoted to God.

-Repenting is to regret, to turn back, to think again, and to change your intentions.

-If we truly repent, inner peace is possible. Sincerity matters, and making that journey within our hearts and making our way through our own versions of the Wilderness means that peace ultimately may stick.

The Story Behind “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear”[1]

-In 1849 Dr. Edmund Sears struggled with writing his sermon for the Christmas Eve service for his Unitarian Congregation in Wayland, Massachusetts. (The First Parish in Wayland—now a Unitarian Universalist congregation—is still there!)

-The Civil War was on the horizon, debates about slavery were raging, poverty was rampant in his own community, and Dr. Sears felt like his spirit was broken. He was having trouble lifting up his congregation.

-He turned to Luke’s Gospel: “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”[2]

-Dr. Sears considered these verses and jotted down a five-verse poem he called “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” and then found another Christmas poem he had written a decade

before. So he decided to use his old Christmas poem, write a short sermon, and then end the Christmas Eve service with his new poem.

-Today the carol is considered joyful, but the congregation probably heard it on Christmas Eve as more of a charge or challenge. Dr. Sears wanted people to look to heaven to then understand how God needs them to serve humanity in God's name.

-Dr. Sears was telling his congregation that this world Jesus was born into is sorely in need of help, and we must hear the cries of those in need and respond. Remember he had the evil nature of slavery and his own community's poverty on his heart when he reflected on Luke and wrote the poem.

-From there, Dr. Sears put his poem in the Christian Register on December 29, 1849 and Richard Storrs Willis (a native Bostonian and graduate of Yale) realized that this poem would be perfect for a tune he had composed years before called simply "Carol." The poem and the tune came together to be what we sing now.

-This beloved Christmas song didn't become famous until after World War I when American troops sang it throughout France during the holiday season. And then after World War II because entertainers like Bing Crosby and Dinah Shore performed it during U.S.O shows for soldiers away from home. "Peace on the earth" became a haunting line and a deep yearning that remains in our lifetime.

-When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling, and the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing. Amen.

[1] Ace Collins, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas, 96-101.

[2] Luke 2:8-9, NRSV.