

John the Baptist, Harriet Tubman and Mr. Rogers
John Wilkinson
The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill
December 15, 2019
Matthew 11:2-11

Thank you for your forbearance and flexibility as we repair our heating system. Several have asked, and no, this is not what was recently addressed in a major capital improvement, but rather a whole new problem. We will have heat provided by a temporary generator and blowers for next Sunday, and the newly fabricated apartment will be installed for us to be good-to-go on Christmas Eve itself. That's the plan. Coffee hour today will be served in the Reception room and then you can spill back into this space; the second hour forum will be downstairs in the Harris ORoom. Join us. And if and when you see Esther Cole, thank her for her diligence in getting this situation fixed and navigating many space usage complexities. All of it will be made possible, as I've said, our Christmas Eve services at 4:30 and 10:00 p.m., with the later service preceded by 30 minutes of wonderful music. Please be present, and invite a friend.

The Benedictine mystic of 1000 years ago, Hildegard of Bingen, asked: "Who are the prophets? They are a royal people, who penetrate mystery and see with the spirit's eyes. In illuminating darkness they speak out. They are living, penetrating clarity. They are a blossom blooming only on the shoot that is rooted in the flood of light."

This Advent let's reclaim the power of prophecy

DAVID JORDAN | DECEMBER 4, 2018

We live in turbulent times. From our stark cultural and religious divides to what Bill Leonard has called America's pre-existing condition of firearm violence to the looming dangers of climate change, we face a future that feels increasingly tenuous. As Christians, however, this is not a time to be afraid. Instead, it is a time to get to work.

In the biblical tradition of prophecy, times like these were familiar territory. Indeed, this was the kind of time, place and political environment for which Jesus was born. According to the Bible, Jesus was not simply a fulfillment of prophecy. In fact, Jesus modeled the kind of vital, prophetic tradition that we are called to reclaim in this season of Advent.

Prophets speak truth to power. Prophets understand God's expectation for an equitable society, where the poor and widows and orphans stand on the same level ground and with the same dignity as the rich and famous. Prophets act with integrity, work for justice, practice kindness and live with humility (Micah 6:8). They demonstrate God's loving-kindness to the left out and the oppressed (Isaiah 58:6-9; Luke 15). Prophets "love the alien/immigrant as we love ourselves" (Leviticus 19:34) and share their resources with refugees (Genesis 46:5-7; Matthew 25:31-40).

A Jesus follower should be a prophet. And to be prophetic, one does as Jesus did.

"Jesus modeled the kind of vital, prophetic tradition that we are called to reclaim in this season of Advent."

Then as now, prophets are not called to predict the future. (Indeed, this was strictly forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:9-12 and Leviticus 19:31). Rather, in the tradition of Jesus, today's prophets are called to *change* the future. We thus reclaim the time-tested covenant relationship with God fully embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus.

The prophets of old had declared that God would not forsake the people called to bless all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3); the people of God are to be a light unto the nations (Isaiah 49:6). But the people of Jesus' day felt surrounded and overpowered by rampant injustice. Swirling controversies and harsh rhetoric can paralyze even the best of us, then and now.

Prophetic hope then blossoms in the advent of the early church. Jesus gave them – and us – clear commands: to live with compassion, to care for the least of these, to welcome the stranger, to love the enemy and to do as he did throughout his ministry.

Therefore, living out prophetic hope this first week of Advent necessitates that we listen carefully, study well, understand fully and recognize the ongoing revelation of God's concerns in our day. With wisdom, we are to interpret the issues and

clearly address the events of our time. As it was in biblical days, every era needs a steady prophetic conscience to bring us back to center, to refocus attention and reallocate resources on those critical points of society most bereft of attention.

Let us be vigilant this Advent season. Let us be prophets for our day, not only speaking truth to power, but continuing to incarnate the spirit of Jesus in our life and work. We are called to offer a relevant faith in every age. Usually unwanted, consistently unheeded, often persecuted, the prophetic call remains a vital but often forgotten part of the meaning of Christmas.

So, as we celebrate Jesus' birth, let us more fully imitate his life. Let's reclaim the power of prophecy. Doing so could make this Advent season more of an adventure than we ever imagined.

TUBMAN

Harriet Tubman (born **Araminta Ross**, c. March 1822^[1] – March 10, 1913) was an American [abolitionist](#) and political activist. Born into [slavery](#), Tubman escaped and subsequently made some 13 missions to rescue approximately 70 enslaved people, including family and friends,^[2] using the network of antislavery activists and safe houses known as the [Underground Railroad](#). During the [American Civil War](#), she served as an armed [scout](#) and [spy](#) for the [Union Army](#). In her later years, Tubman was an activist in the struggle for [women's suffrage](#).

Born a slave in [Dorchester County, Maryland](#), Tubman was beaten and whipped by her various masters as a child. Early in life, she suffered a traumatic head wound when an irate slave owner threw a heavy metal weight intending to hit another slave, but hitting her instead. The injury caused dizziness, pain, and spells of [hypersomnia](#), which occurred throughout her life. After her injury, Tubman began experiencing strange visions and vivid dreams, which she ascribed to premonitions from God. These experiences, combined with her [Methodist](#) upbringing, led her to become devoutly religious.

In 1849, Tubman escaped to [Philadelphia](#), then immediately returned to Maryland to rescue her family. Slowly, one group at a time, she brought relatives with her out of the state, and eventually guided dozens of other slaves to freedom. Traveling by night and in extreme secrecy, Tubman (or "[Moses](#)", as she was called) "never lost a passenger".^[3] After the [Fugitive Slave Act of 1850](#) was passed, she helped guide fugitives farther north into [British North America](#), and helped newly freed slaves find work. Tubman met [John Brown](#) in 1858, and helped him plan and recruit supporters for [his 1859 raid](#) on [Harpers Ferry](#).

When the Civil War began, Tubman worked for the Union Army, first as a cook and nurse, and then as an armed scout and spy. The first woman to lead an armed expedition in the war, she guided the [raid at Combahee Ferry](#), which liberated more than 700 slaves. After the war, she retired to the family home on property she had purchased in 1859 in [Auburn, New York](#), where she cared for her aging parents. She was active in the women's suffrage movement until illness overtook her, and she had to be admitted to a home for elderly [African Americans](#) that she had helped to establish years earlier. After her death in 1913, she became an icon of courage and freedom.

Not just say what is wrong – that is easy

Say what is wrong and envision how it may be

Take inspiration from prophets, take up our call to be prophets

Tubman and Rogers – both people of faith who acted out their faith in their real world –

Said what was wrong – slavery, racism, kids' TV, lack of kindness

Versions of justice, prophetic bottom line

Rise – John the Baptist

Not say how – or even the details of what – but we know the broad contours – biblical

Measure our actions and beliefs against those values

We are called to be everyday prophets

At school, at work, in the world

The values by which our prophetic acts are measures

Isaiah –

Care for the vulnerable

Those who are weak and feeble will be strengthened – physically and in every other way

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

DO NOT FEAR

Psalm 146

who keeps faith for ever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,

The Response

Also look at last Sunday – Matthew 3:1-12, wilderness, judgment and repentance

Matthew 11:2-11

Charles Cousar – Texts fo Peahcing year A

John now in prison

Jesus not even he kinf of messiah JONB eoected – not laying root ax to the root

Jesus – what kond ofmessiah he is (see Isaiah 35:5-6 and 29:18-19)

Jesus' primary activity – festoration fo the needy and life to the lifeless

Jhn – and we – new understanding fo who messiah is – marginalized poeple

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Fleming Rutledge: John the Baptist Points to the Real Hope of Advent

We’re not awaiting a helpless baby, but a righteous and powerful judge.

FLEMING RUTLEDGE NOVEMBER 27, 2018

Image: Tom Barrett / Unsplash

This article is from the [December 2018 issue](#). Subscribers can read all of CT's [digital archives](#).

It would be hard to say which is more alien to our contemporary ideas of getting ready for Christmas, the season of Advent or the figure of John the Baptist—the man who greeted the Pharisees and Sadducees by calling them a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7, ESV throughout). How would you like to get that on a Christmas card?

This unlovable figure is very much out of sync with our times, yet he is one of the foremost figures of Advent, at least in the preaching calendar followed in my own Episcopal Church tradition. Like John the Baptist, Advent is out of phase with its time, with our time. It encroaches upon us in an uncomfortable way, making us feel somewhat uneasy with its stubborn resistance to Christmas cheer. To be sure, we have done a pretty good job of domesticating Advent, and I am by no means above this sort of thing myself. Every year, I used to buy Advent calendars for my children with cute little doors that open and show cute little pictures. I have yet to find an Advent calendar that has a picture of John the Baptist. We really don’t know exactly *what* to do with him; he doesn’t fit into anything.

But here he is by the river, dressed in the fashion of the wilderness and assaulting the crowds that come out to hear him: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? . . . Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3:7, 10).

Kjw

We can't accept what is and simply wait, passively, for things to change, or not

We also can't simply criticize, without both offering an alternate vision and committing ourselves to its realization

That's why waiting, anticipating in Advent is not passive, but active, leaning in, full of hope

We see with clarity and tell with truth the way things are, now

We envision with hope the way things may be, will be

Risk – jBap, MLK

Truth == say embarrassing word when needed, confront word when needed

Literal and figurative

Doer, giver, Liberator, opener, raiser, loer, watcher, sustainer

The marginalized, etc. Jesus attention