

Sermon for Year C Advent 2  
Baruch 5:1-9 Psalm 126 Philipians 1:1-11 Luke 3:1-6  
December 10, 2006  
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC 28605  
The Rev. Jeanne Finan

### **In my imprisonment**

Cool Hand Luke.  
    Stir Crazy.  
        Escape from Alcatraz.  
            The Rock.  
                The Shawshank Redemption.  
                    The Green Mile.  
                        The Hurricane.  
                            Dead Man Walking.  
                                Bonhoeffer.

All these films have something in common:  
    they give us a glimpse of life in prison.  
Sometimes the person is in prison because of some crime they did commit.  
Sometimes the person is in prison because of some crime they did not commit.

Judging by the number of prison movies—  
    if you check Internet Data Movie Base  
        you will find 3,128 movies with a prison theme—  
so judging by that number,  
    I think there is something about prison that fascinates us,  
    Even resonates with us.

I don't know about you,  
    but I am afraid of prison.  
It is a place I definitely do not want to go.

But occasionally I have a dream that I have been arrested—  
    I am going to prison and there is no way out. I am trapped.  
It is not a dream;  
    it is a nightmare!  
But then I get to wake up.  
That is not the case for those who really are literally incarcerated.

Paul was imprisoned more than once.  
In the letter to the Philippians this morning,  
    Paul is writing to his friends from prison.  
But it's like he's sitting there in his cell,  
    boldly wearing his t-shirt that says NO FEAR.

For Paul writes as one who is joyful,  
thankful,  
prayerful.

It's not that he is happy about being in prison,  
but Paul clearly knows why he is there:  
not because of any crime he committed,  
but because he is telling people about Jesus  
and the authorities cannot shut him up.  
So instead, they lock him up.

Paul continues, even in prison, to practice what he has been preaching out in the world:  
Rejoice in the Lord always.  
Let your love overflow with knowledge and insight.  
Do what you know is right,  
And everything will be just fine.  
God will see to that.

Paul sees beyond the walls of his physical prison.  
Paul writes with great hope for the future.

And then we come to Luke's gospel  
And here comes that rather wild prophet John, son of Zechariah,  
older cousin to Jesus.  
Here is John,  
coming straight at us,  
right out of the wilderness,  
shouting, crying out:

*You have the right to remain silent.  
Anything you say  
can and will be used against you in a court of law.  
You have the right to speak to an attorney...*

Well, that isn't exactly what John the Baptizer says.  
He didn't really start off his ministry reading people the Miranda warning.

But what John said  
certainly stopped people.

What John said certainly let people know  
that the whole world was about to be turned upside down--  
hills made low, crooked paths straightened--

What John said  
was that everything was going to change.

Get ready.

What John said certainly made people think--  
think about how they were living their lives,  
what they had done, what they had left undone,  
and what they needed to do differently.

There is such hope in this morning's gospel story.  
This image of John coming out of the wilderness is an image of good news in itself.

John is heralding our own return to God--  
just as God led the Israelites out of their time in the desert,  
so will God lead you and me.  
If only, we turn around and let it happen.

Get ready, says John.  
Advent is that time when we wait—believing, knowing, surrendering.  
Trusting,  
that regardless of the desert we live in at this moment,  
God WILL come.

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God, says John.  
All flesh.  
Everyone.

God is about to send into the world the prison-break we've all been waiting for.

You see we all live in some type of prison...  
a prison of our own fears, our own addictions,  
our own lies, our own bitterness, our own sorrows.  
Our own custom-created means  
of separating ourselves from God.  
of keeping God on the outside.

God sends prophets, messengers.  
It doesn't mean we listen to them.

There is a story about Mark Twain.  
A friend came up to Mark Twain and said,  
*Mark, I am going to travel all the way to Mt. Sinai  
and from the top of Mt. Sinai,  
I am going to read a loud the Ten Commandments.*

To which Mark Twain replied,  
*Why don't you just stay in Boston and try following the Ten Commandments?*

That is what the prophets really ask us.  
Why don't you just do the right thing?  
God will lead you.  
Surrender to God.  
Trust.

Prepare the way.  
Do the right thing.  
It's so hard.  
Or is it?

When we lived in Memphis,  
there was an enormous toy drive  
coordinated by the Salvation Army every year.

Yes, we do toy drives here but this toy drive  
was on an absolutely gargantuan scale.  
The toys quite literally filled a warehouse.  
Memphis is a large city of well over a million people  
and many of those people live in absolute poverty.

Tom and I and both our children along with scores of other volunteers  
worked at this toy drive for years.  
There were weeks of preparation, of getting ready.  
All the donated toys had to be sorted into age categories,  
into boy/girl categories,  
bikes, dolls, baby toys.  
You get the idea.

Then we had to take the request forms from each family  
and go through the stacks and stacks of toys and fill large sacks  
with a toy for each child in the family.

Then the distribution nights began.  
Parents or grandparents would come to pick up their sack of toys for their children.

Each family had been assigned a number to prevent families with similar names  
from being mixed up with each other,  
and to make the distribution go quickly and smoothly.

We picked up one of the toy sacks and went out into the distribution room  
and called out the number.  
The family member heard their number and came up and signed for their sack.  
And off they went.

Only a year came when our son Jody just could not do it.  
He could not call a human being by a number.

*That's awful, Mom, he said to me.*

*Well, we just need to do what they told us to do, I replied.*

Jody was only in middle school at the time

but he knew there was something wrong with calling a person by a number.

But he picked up one of his sacks, walked out into the distribution area and called out,

*Mr. Martin Palmer"*

*Mr. Palmer?*

And everyone stopped.

And Mr. Palmer stepped forward,

And Jody looked down at the request form and said,

*Mr. Palmer, I see here your have three children—Alicia, Douglas and Malcolm.*

*Is that right?*

And Mr. Palmer responded, *That's right.*

And Jody handed him the sack of toys and said, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Palmer.*

Our son refused to call someone by a number.

That night he was the prophet crying out in the wilderness.

Calling out to all of us to do the RIGHT thing.

Not the logical thing. Not the easy thing. Not the obedient thing.

Not the thing that everyone else was going along with and doing.

But to do the RIGHT thing.

He called people by their name.

He respected the dignity of every human being.

And then other workers began to do the same.

We all began to call people by their names.

All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

God has not singled out the prophets or the clergy or adults or anyone else

to be the only ones to prepare the way.

God has called all flesh, every one of us, to do God's work in this world.

And that work is simply this:

Do the right thing.

If you don't know where to start,  
start on page 304 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.  
start with the words of our Baptismal Covenant:

- + Persevere in resisting evil.
- + Whenever you sin, repent and return to God.
- + Proclaim the Good News by what you say and by how you act
- + Seek and serve Christ in all persons.
- + Love your neighbor as yourself.
- + Strive for justice and peace among all people.
- + Respect the dignity of every human being.

That is the only map we need  
to lead us through the wilderness,  
to make our way to the stable  
to get ready to kiss that baby  
who is on his way.