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Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10

TRUTHFUL TIDINGS

The first prophet I ever knew was David Sholin. David was the pastor of my parents' church in Arizona. I call David a prophet because he, like all prophets, was a truth-teller who summoned people to face the truth about themselves and about God. Prophets can certainly come in all forms and sizes. A prophet could still tell the truth and be gentle and soft-spoken. But David clearly took the form of the great biblical prophets. He was a large man who in the pulpit became larger than life. His preaching was bold and impassioned and very direct about the high demands made upon us by the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had little use for those who would domesticate the gospel, who would tame Jesus' message and would try to turn Christianity into some casual social convention. In particular, David preached about the gospel's demands for justice, and he called Christians out for our apathy to suffering, our tacit support of injustice when it benefits us, and our appetites for excess. And he was also fiery and passionate when proclaiming God's unwavering love for us. David was a masterful preacher, and when he thundered from the pulpit, you felt as if the voice of God was speaking.

As you might imagine with such a strong personality, people were *never* neutral about David. Many people in his congregation loved David. And others hated him--*hated* him, believed he was too political both in and out of the pulpit. But here's the interesting thing. When David finally retired after more than thirty years of serving that church, when David finally retired, you know what happened? Some of his fiercest critics stopped coming to church. And it makes you wonder if there is something in us that is drawn to hearing an authentic message of

truth, even when it is uncomfortable--maybe like knowing when we need some bad tasting medicine for our well-being.

Maybe that is why all those people in Jerusalem and Judea kept flocking to hear John the Baptist. Maybe they too felt they needed to hear the truth told to them about themselves. Because, clearly, John was not preaching a message that was comfortable. He was telling people the truth about their lives and calling them to repent, to turn around, to change their course, and to follow God's way. And remember where John was preaching this message. He wasn't in the synagogue just around the corner. No, he was way out in the wilderness. People had to trek way out into the dry barren wilderness just to hear John tell them unpleasant things about themselves! And still they came. So maybe, maybe there is something in us that craves hearing an authentic message about ourselves--even when that message speaks hard truths.

That is, hopefully, what takes place here at church. Hopefully, the church is a place for truth-telling. In our corporate prayer of confession, for example, we admit the reality that we are broken, imperfect, and flawed people. And even when the words of the corporate confession don't apply to us personally, there is a place we believe in telling the truth about the brokenness of humanity--of the human family . But notice another important moment for truth-telling that comes immediately after our prayer of confession. Always, always after our confession, we have the Assurance of God's Grace--those words reminding us of the truth of God's unwavering love and forgiveness for us, always. We read the scriptures to hear the truth: the words telling us about our need for God and the words telling us about God's unending graciousness toward us. The hymns we sing tell us the truths. "O come, o come Emmanuel" we will sing a bit later pleads for God to "ransom captive Israel." If a ransom needs to be paid for us, then that means

we are captives. And so the song invites us to consider what holds us captive. Let's look at the truth.

We come to church to hear the truth, because the truth is not always told in the rest of our lives. We are easily taken in by falsehoods. Like: the person with the most stuff wins. And: things will make you happy--that's one we hear a lot this time of year. And: people get what they deserve. And: we're all just doing the best we can. There are all kinds of falsehoods that swirl around us in our world. But we come to church to hear the truth that does not pander to what we *want* to believe but which instead tells us what we need to believe--because our souls need it and our lives need it.

If we understand Advent as the season of preparation for the coming of Christ, then truth-telling is an important part of that preparation. Advent calls for honesty because without it we will never understand the meaning of Christmas--the meaning of Jesus' birth. Advent calls us to be honest about our need for God because unless we do, we can never appreciate the gift of a savior. First we have to understand the need we have, in order to celebrate the gift we receive. And without that understanding, Christmas becomes nothing more than a gathering of family members--much like Thanksgiving only this time with gifts and decorations and a lot more expensive.

So into our Advent season today come striding two prophets, each with important words of truth. First, we have John the Baptist. He's clearly not someone we would want to invite to our holiday Christmas party. He's not dressed right, for sure. And he doesn't make polite conversation. Because he turns to us and tells us things about ourselves we would rather not hear. He doesn't tell us about the imperfections of *other* people. We have an easy time locating the flaws in other people. But John looks at each one of us in the eye and tells us about

ourselves. Quit pretending, he tells us. Quit pretending you're life is neat and orderly. Quit pretending you are better than others. Quit pretending that your flaws are minor compared to other people. Quit pretending you are in control. And then he tells us to turn our lives around toward God. To repent. That's an old fashioned word. It means to turn in a new direction.

Now, I want to be clear about something. The call to repent is sometimes used like a weapon to bludgeon people over the head with fear for their eternal souls. "Repent or else" is sometimes the message. But that is not what repentance is really about. Repenting will not make God love you more--because God already loves you. And failing to repent will not make God hate you or reject you. Because God never rejects anyone. So, we don't repent of our behaviors in order to change God or how God feels about us. Isn't that amazing! Isn't that refreshing to know! Repentance, which means turning our lives toward God, is something we do because we realize *we* need God. We need to walk the way of God--because walking our own way has clearly not benefitted us or--perhaps most importantly--the other people in our world. Writer Calvin Chinn states that "Reverence begins with a deep understanding of our own limitations." We are limited. We know pain and suffering. We know brokenness. And our true reverence of God begins when we realize we can't fix ourselves on our own. And so we repent and turn to the source of truth. Advent is about turning to the source of truth.

David Sholin was the first prophet I knew. But there have been others. And I bet you have known some prophets too. They are those who tell the truth and call us to turn to the source of truth. Some do this gently. Others do this in ways that confront us, even irritate us. A lot of times we wish they would go away, stop going on about racial injustice, about global warming, about educational inequalities, about torture, about a living wage. But thank God for the prophets, the truth-tellers, who call us home again and again when we stray from the way of

God. If you want to discover signs of God's presence, look for the truth-tellers, for those calling us to turn again to the path of God.

John the Baptist is not the only prophet we are blessed with today. The prophet Isaiah also speaks words of truth to us this Advent season. Isaiah was not unlike John the Baptist in that he too could preach fiery words of judgment, critiquing human injustice and greed. But today, today we get a different picture from Isaiah. Today Isaiah speaks these words of truth: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." This is poetry of course. Isaiah used these poetic words to bring hope to his people. A tree stump is all that remains after the tree has been cut down and its life is over. And that is how Isaiah's people felt at the time he wrote to them. That is sometimes how we feel in the course of our lives--when a loved one dies, when our job has been eliminated, when our marriage falls apart, when our addictions have brought us to a point lower than we could have ever imagined, when our shame overwhelms us. We too may feel like dead stumps when confronted with our darkness. Or we feel that way when we read the news about bombings in Syria, violence on university campuses, shootings of police officers, abuse of children. We may feel cut down and left for dead.

But Isaiah today speaks an important truth. He tells us that into our situation of brokenness and deadness, God can bring forth life. It may come small--like a little shoot coming out of a dead tree stump, or in the birth of a child to an impoverished unwed couple. But God is always at work bringing life out of the places we may have considered dead. In you. And in me. And in our world. We have hope in the face of our own sin, in the face of our own pain, in the face of the brokenness of our world, because of what God can do, the life God can bring about. And *that* is why we repent. Because repentance means turning to the source of life--life for ourselves and life for our world. Truth-tellers don't just speak uncomfortable words. Truth-tellers also bring us this message of hope. Thank God for the truth-tellers, the prophets in our lives, who in the midst of the darkness, point the way to the light.