

Prophets are Weird

Matthew 3:1-11 by Patty Friesen, Second Advent Dec. 4/22

Slide 1: John the Baptist art by OMC youth. This is an original watercolour by an OMC youth. It isn't signed but if anyone remembers painting it, let me know. It's classic John the Baptist with his uneven eyes and wild hair and beard. The artist captured it - John the Baptist is weird. The doors of Matthew's Gospel suddenly swing open, and there stands John in the wilderness of Judea. It's always shock to see him. He appears every Second Advent and every year he is just as weird as the year before, eating bugs, looking and probably smelling like a camel. He even sounds like a braying camel, "In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord." "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." "You brood of vipers. Who told you you could flee the wrath to come?" Weird as he was, people responded to him and flooded out to the desert because they could feel the truth of his words and they wanted to be part of God's kingdom. John baptized them, in the Jordan River as a sign of their new beginning in the kingdom of heaven on earth.

God tries to get our attention with weird prophets and their anti-social behaviour. Elijah ate road kill brought to him by ravens, Baalam talked to his donkey and his donkey talked back. Jeremiah buried his underwear under a rock and dug it up again and poor Ezekial laid on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days and then cooked lunch over a fire of his own ...well, you'll have to read the story for yourself in Ezekial 4. God's ways with the world are often strange, unforeseen, and unpredictable. God's movement shatters the mold, violates the categories, breaks in on

the world as a jarring surprise. The full of reversals. Everything is upside down. Nothing is as it seems.

The prophet Isaiah, who ran around naked to get people's attention, said the kingdom of heaven on earth as a surprising and strange place where lions and lambs take naps together and wolves and calves play tag and children play with snakes. Let's turn to Sae-Jin Lee's peaceable kingdom art on page 12 of Voices Together. Do you see the spiders and bees and teradactyls? The bears are hiking with the hikers and no one is scared of the monsters. Weird and wonderful. How is this strangeness possible? Through the coming of the Messiah we celebrate this season.

Few texts in all of biblical literature are better known or loved than this one—and for good reason. For all who read or hear them read aloud, these verses articulate the deep and persistent human hope for justice and peace, and within the Christian church, this text expresses the promise of a Messiah who will establish peace on earth. Whether in this world or beyond, God wills—and one day will bring about through Christ—justice and peace for the world and all its living creatures, human and animal alike. (New Interpreter's Bible Commentary).

Jesus himself is in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. He performs actions that grip people's attention – healings, feedings, raising the dead, cleansing the temple. He proclaims the kingdom of God is near and he is the one to usher it in.

A few weeks ago, I was in Portland, Oregon. They were running a campaign with signs that said, "Keep Portland Weird." I didn't think it took much effort on their part! It was as weird as it was 30 years ago when I lived there. I went back for Portland Mennonite Church's 100th Anniversary where I was a youth pastor at age 25, the same

age as Luke, coincidentally. The congregation took a chance on a young Canadian for whom they had to get a green card and had to budget to pay me 3/4 time so I could afford to live because I wasn't allowed to work other jobs. They supported my Clinical Pastoral Education and ordained me and set me on an amazing path of 30+ years of ministry.

Church anniversaries are important homecomings. They remind us of our beginnings in life and faith and work. And 100th anniversaries are really something. When I went through customs, the agent asked what I was doing in Portland and I said going to a church's 100th anniversary. He paused because he doesn't get that answer very often and slowly replied, "Well, that's something." It is something. Most churches don't make it to 100.

When I worked for Portland Mennonite, we had 15 in our youth group but sadly only one still actively participates in church. That's not my fault! Despite the loss of their young people, the church continues because young families flow into PMC because it is the only Mennonite church in a city of two million. You could say they have a niche market. A young mom I met said she had left church but came back because she wanted a church experience for her kids. Former youth who had left and came back for the anniversary said while they had outgrown the church of their childhood, they valued their experience and regretted their kids didn't have the same kind of bonded youth group that shared similar values about God.

100th anniversaries are important not only for homecomings but for reconciliation as well. The anniversary committee even had on their brochure, "We admit as a congregation we made mistakes and hope there is forgiveness for the hurt individuals

have felt who left the church.” That’s a bold admission. My friend who used to serve on council there had left the church and faith altogether but came back for the anniversary. Ironically during the hymn sing, someone I didn’t like while I was in college choir because she was a show-off, slid into the pew beside me and together we warbled away, basking in the a cappella hymns of our childhood.

In the journey of churches, churches change over 100 years or they die. That became very clear looking at old photographs of horses for transportation and women in head coverings in church. The church planters of Portland Mennonite would be humbly proud the church is still thriving 100 years later, but they couldn’t have ever imagined it thriving with women preachers and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered and queer people with homeless families hosted in the basement. They would think that was very weird.

Pastor Rod Stafford challenged Portland Mennonite to keep church weird. He said, “For the next 100 years do not be afraid to take risks. It is said you can’t teach an old dog new tricks and older congregations get into maintenance mode - maintaining the building, maintaining current programming, keeping church predictable. But when our mission becomes only maintenance, we become inward-focused and anxious - trying to meet budgets and keep the doors open and may miss prophetic imagining and opportunities for change.”

Osler is 94 years old. In six short years we will have our 100th anniversary where we’ll be looking at pictures of horses and German hymnals and people in weird clothing. In six short years, our 10 year olds will be driving and our 12 year olds will be

graduating and voting and any youth older than that will be working or in university. In six years, our homes will have solar panels and we'll be driving electric cars.

At OMC 100 some things will be the same – hopefully we'll still have deep trust in God and Christ, great music and a strong community. At OMC 100 some things will be different. Sadly, some of us will have died and will be deeply missed. At OMC 100, hopefully we have new babies and new attenders to infuse our community and imagination. Hopefully, we'll have even more Osler community engagement using food and our big building. I'll hopefully be retired by then and making coffee for after church and Luke will have taken over with his youthful energy and vision. I'm John the Baptist preparing the way for the Messiah!

What does the future hold? These days Christianity is on the fringe of society and Anabaptists are on the prophetic fringe of Christianity and then within Anabaptism, Osler Mennonite is kind of out there. Who else in the world gets out of a warm bed at 9 a.m. on a winter Sunday morning to go sit on a hard piece of wood and listen to someone drone on about the future of the church? Who sings songs nobody else in the world sings but a few other weirdos? Who gets up on a winter Sunday morning and goes to a place where they pour water on your head and make you nibble on a bit of dry bread and yucky juice to remember someone from 2000 years ago? Who joins a group where they take all your money and your time and then fight with you in ways that will remind you of the family you grew up in? Why would anyone even want to go to church?

Church is important to us or we wouldn't be here week after week in person or on-line. I'm stunned by the volunteer time and energy our council and Sunday school teachers and trustees and worship leaders put into this place. We do it because we're

getting a big return on our investment of time, money and conflict - a return in growing in our own faith and seeing the next generation grow in faith, a return in being part of a supportive community that's there when we need them and a return of satisfaction in being part of something bigger than ourselves, in contributing in Osler and the city.

We're already weird but to make it to OMC 100, we have to risk being even more weird than people already think we are. We are changing. Nothing dramatic but we're slowly shifting shape. We're not what we were when I came eight years ago. We mourn the people who have left, including our own family members. Church used to be the centre of our lives but not so much anymore. We will have conflict for sure as we shift and change because the stakes are high - the very future of the church is at stake. We want to honour our values of music and tradition and service while shifting our outlook. We cannot afford to be the silent in the land anymore. We have to put ourselves out there and invite our friends and relatives back to church. Strangers do not just show up at church – although sometimes they do like the recently retired woman who stopped by who heard we played pickleball at church and she wants to join a beginner's class. And like Shyla Cross who strode into our Mission and Service meeting and started the Osler Community Garden five years ago.

We want to be thriving and not just surviving at OMC 100. To do this we're trying to have child-engaging worship to attract children and families. We are trying to use the talents and prophetic vision of our youth and young adults even if the vision makes us uncomfortable.

We're trying to meet the needs of our elders. We're trying to have leaner committees and release things that take energy but don't bring return. We are trying to share staff

with other Mennonite churches and have an annual joint summer worship service with other Mennonites and do other collaborative efforts. We're trying to deepen our spiritual lives and social impact in the Valley. We're trying to put ourselves out there with advertising - a street marquee and posted events on Facebook and town newsletter and Gazette. We're our own best kept secret and we need to share our good news. People are looking for such a community as ours to worship and deepen their faith and play pickleball with.

May we be courageous enough to be weird like John the Baptist and trust that God works in us and through us and in spite of us until we are 100 years old and beyond. Let's close with this prayer from Kate Bowler:

*God, we are waiting for love,
not the simple kind or the sweep-you-off-your-feet
kind,
but the absurd kind.*

*The kind wrapped in rags,
resting in a bucket of animal feed.
Love enough to save us all.*

*Blessed are we who look for Love
deeper, fuller, truer-than we have ever
known,
than we could have ever hoped for.*

*Blessed are we who seek you,
the light that dawned so long ago
in that dark stable.
Love given.
Love received.*

*Receive this gift, dear one.
Love has come for you.*

Sing: We Dream of a Turning #209 Voices Together