

THE SURPRISE ENTRANCE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-17; Matthew 3:1-12

One of my favorite shows in recent years has been the reruns of Seinfeld. And in spite of Michael Richards' onstage meltdown a year or two ago, I especially like the character he played, Cosmo Kramer, who comes exploding through the door of Jerry's apartment in nearly every episode, sliding across the threshold, his hair looking as if he had stuck his finger in a light socket, and bursting in to tell Jerry about some moronic discovery or to pass along some insider information that he takes as unquestionably accurate. It's the surprise entrance of Kramer that often gives the show its best moments.

There is, surprisingly, a Kramer-esque element to the way in which John the Baptist bursts on the scene in Matthew's gospel, with his camel's hair clothing and leather loincloth, and locusts caught in his wild backwoods hair, a man strangely out of sorts with his time. Many a Times Square preacher has attempted to match John's out of season urgency, but none have done so with as much effect.

John's message is a call to repentance, announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And he cites as his authority an adaptation of Isaiah's prophecy, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." He managed to draw a goodly crowd around him. Matthew tells us that people came from the region around the Jordan, from Jerusalem and Judea, eager to hear John's message and wanting to be baptized.

Just as in New York today, I doubt in those days there was any shortage of oddballs and misfits in the big city of Jerusalem, the kind of person that can get lost in the larger sprawl of people busily going about their own business, leaving the peculiar to fend for themselves. So it was not just John's strange sense of style, his leather loincloth, his tonsorial chaos, or his macrobiotic diet sprinkled with insects and bees comb that drew the attention of the city's people. It was his ascetic life, his purity of purpose, his eccentric marking of time, his awareness of the nearness of God that brought them out, packing their lunches and stowing their towels for drying off after the baptisms.

"Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near," he said, as he described himself as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness."

John's startling entrance on the scene of Matthew's gospel and his role in human history is not simply to be taken as an entertainment, a laughable distraction in an otherwise serious play. Like Kramer, John is passing along insider information, but this time John is well informed. He knows what hour it is. He knows that the time is fulfilled, and people must act accordingly.

What John knows, is precisely what Isaiah had prophesied so long before, "a shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."

John was not himself that shoot springing forth, but he was the harbinger of it, nonetheless. His role was to reawaken the awareness and the spirit of God's people, who about that time were worn down, discouraged, weary of the Roman boot pressing against their neck.

They waited for hope in a time when hope seemed dim and faith was flagging. For centuries they had longed for the coming one who would reign in the manner of King David, bringing healing in his wings like Elijah. *When the Messiah comes, they would say, there will be no Roman occupation. When the messiah comes, the poor will have enough. When the messiah comes the wrongly imprisoned will be set free. When the messiah comes, there will be no more weeping or crying any more. When the messiah comes...* They waited and they watched, and year passed on to year, and decade to decade and century to century and still no fulfillment of the promise. The tree of Jesse seemed cut down and abandoned, lifeless and rotting, an old stump where once a mighty cedar had stood.

We know such times as well, the seasons when hope seems dim, when the world has become like that old stump of Jesse looking dried up and barren, and we wait discouraged, not even certain any more of that for which we wait.

It was W.H. Auden, in his Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*, who said something that "the most real thing about us is that we are waiting."

Life is a waiting game. We are always leaning forward to a future that we have not yet seen but that is dawning nonetheless if we can only be alert to its signs and receptive to its coming.

This time of year we are especially aware of waiting. Waiting in line to check out, or check in, or to get the check. We impatiently wait for the thing we ordered online to come in the mail and track it in its various steps along the way. We're waiting for Christmas and wondering what this year will be like and who will be there and who will not, and what it will be like without them.

We're waiting for better news in the Middle East, for news of war's end, and a time without terrorism, and an Israel that can exist without threats, and a Palestine that can be independent and free.

We're waiting for the job we need, and the recognition we've earned, and the raise that we're counting on. We're waiting for something new in a marriage that has grown old not in years but in intimacy.

We're waiting for the earth to be safe again, from warming and pollution and splitting atoms. We're waiting for America to wake up. And we're waiting for a cure for cancer and AIDS and Alzheimer's and mental illness. We're waiting for God to hear our prayers and answer our greatest needs and come and reassure us in the night when the darkness puts its arms around us and the silence says so much. "We're waiting for a rebirth of wonder"¹ as Lawrence Ferlinghetti put it so aptly. Waiting for wonder...

In more ways than we may realize we're waiting for that old stump of Jesse that Isaiah wrote about and prophesied so long ago, to spring forth as a shoot rising from what once was in the hope that it might be again. Maybe all we need is for someone to come along and reassure us that it can. Some surprise entrance, like a shoot rising from an old

tree stump, or John the Baptist sliding across the threshold and promising that even in the desert there can be a highway to our God.

Can we really believe in such a thing? Does it ever happen?

In the dreary days after 9/11 the city was going through a financial crisis. The economy of New York had been hard hit. Many financial firms and brokerage houses once located in the World Trade Center and in Lower Manhattan decided in the midst of the crisis to move their offices to New Jersey, or to mid-town or even Connecticut. Some of the members of the church decided that they did not want to raise children in a city that might be the target of terrorist attacks and people were moving away.

As a result the city's budget underwent a fiscal slowdown if not a meltdown. Many programs were being closed and cuts in the city's budget were taking their toll. One of the hardest hit was funding for senior centers like our own program here at First run by the Caring Community. Seventy five seniors come here every day for lunch and for social interaction, to sing and to celebrate birthdays, to play guitars and croon in a chorus, and take advantage of counseling and assistance available to them. It's a vital support to older members of our community. But the city was running short of funds and wanted to cut back on spending, and it had to come from somewhere.

What did we do? We packed up our seniors and took them downtown on busses. We made signs and placards and went down to city hall and we testified, I testified, and folks in walkers and wheelchairs testified, people with gray and silver hair that looked like Kramer's testified, folks on fixed incomes, the older people of the city, the ones in small flats and SRO's, and studio apartments, and old pre-war walkups, folks who'd never been in city hall before, the people who are usually ignored and would have been forgotten, appeared in the city's grand hall of council meeting and stood in the aisles and surrounded the balcony, and crowded into the chairs that they brought in for the weak kneed and hard of hearing, and we testified all afternoon, a minute or two apiece, late into the night until the council members couldn't listen any more.

Shoots of life from the old stump of Jesse that everyone thought was lifeless we were; testifying, calling the city to repent, and take care of its aging and poor.

And you know something... they did. The council came up with some money. Our council member Christine Quinn came up with some money, the church came up with some money, and we made it happen. A branch growing out of the roots of the old stump of Jesse. Who would have thought?

Here is this old church on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, three hundred years old almost. Not so many years ago, a lot of people had given up on the Village, the demographics had changed, fewer people were coming to church in spite of the best of leadership. It seemed like this wonderful old place was declining in support and membership and strength. The buildings were aging and falling into disrepair.

But by the beginning of the 90's, lower Manhattan came alive again. Housing in the Village and Chelsea and Soho and Tribeca downtown grew and the church enjoyed an upswing in membership and vitality. Twice this congregation that was back on its heels raised several million dollars to first to repair and refurbish the exterior of the South Wing, and then later the interior, breathing new life into this aging plant.

Today we're like the old woman who lived in the shoe; we have so many children we don't know what to do. We have an enviable problem. We are going to have to get more use out of the Mellin Macnab Building, redesign and refit it, sometime in the near future, because as it is, it's limiting our growth and our life together as a congregation. We need more classrooms, more space for kids, more rooms for meetings and community use.

And here we are in this secular city. A town in which almost no one is Protestant any more, in a church three hundred years old. Traditional, Bach and Beethoven and Mozart, and Poulenc from the choir; no praise band or PowerPoint projection screen for the hymns. And yet we are bursting at the seams. Who would have thought?

Maybe John might have seen it, "Prepare the way of the Lord," he said, "even in the desert." You never know.

And maybe Isaiah might have seen it from afar, long ago, "A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse," he said, "and a branch shall grow out of his roots..."

We should never count God out. Because just about the point when we are sure we know how things are going to turn out, looking at the old stump, there appears a fresh shoot, a sprig of green, a sign of life.

God is never finished with us. Which is why we wait and watch and stand ready to be a part of whatever God intends for the future. Sometimes surprisingly so.

I'm grateful to Rick Spalding, Chaplain at Williams College for telling this story. His words.²

One evening last year there was an interview on NPR with Cory A. Booker, the mayor of Newark, New Jersey. He's 38 years old and lives in Brick Towers, one of Newark's public housing projects. He's a Rhodes Scholar and Yale Law School graduate – so his world is bigger than where he lives. But living where he does – often without heat or hot water, surrounded by gangs and poverty – gives him insights into the realities of the urban landscape that few public officials can draw on as they govern.

Booker talked about the reason he decided to make the commitment to the city that he did. He recalled a time when he was working as a tenants' rights lawyer, when one day he went to knock on the door of the head of the Brick Towers tenants association – a Mrs. Virginia Jones. When she opened the door and he introduced himself and said he wanted to help, Mrs. Jones told him to follow her. They went outside, to the street, and there Jones demanded to know what the young lawyer saw around him. Drug dealers, a crack house, rundown projects, responded Booker. "Well, you can't help me," she said and started to walk away. Booker caught up with her and demanded an explanation. "Boy you need to learn something. The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. If you're one of those people who see problems, darkness, and despair, that's all there's ever going to be. But if you're one of those people who see hope, opportunity, love, and even the face of God, then you can help me."

Sometimes it's pretty hard to see any signs of hope in this world where there are so many signs of despair. War and terrorism, and a man goes berserk in a Midwestern mall and kills eight people and then himself, cancer showing up everywhere even among

the young, people filling homeless shelter's including our own in this richest nation on earth.

Maybe the only way that things could possibly get better would be if God intervenes. Which is, of course, the point.

In the midst of our despair, our weariness in waiting, a voice cries in the wilderness that God will not leave us comfortless, and God will not leave us alone. For a shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse and a branch will grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him. For he shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

Take heart, all of you who are waiting, all of you who are discouraged, you who are weary and dream of more, you who look for healing, relief, and release. Don't count God out. Even this late in time, a shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse...

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¹ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, A Coney Island of the Mind (New York: New Directions, 1958)

² I have quoted liberally from Rev. Spalding's paper on the Isaiah 11:1-10 text, delivered at the annual gathering of the Moveable Feast, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, January 2007.