“Turn the Sound Off”

A Sermon for Year C, Advent II

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Scripture: Luke 3:1-6

When my siblings and I were little, we used to watch Saturday morning television. In contrast to today, when children’s programming is offered all day every day, even on PBS, when I was growing up, Saturday mornings were *the* time when children’s programming was on. Spanning 6 years in age from the oldest to the youngest, there were few, if any, cartoons that my siblings and I could agree on.

We had many arguments about what to finally settle on each week, until we discovered one program we could all agree on. Not only could we agree on it, we delighted in it—laughed hysterically throughout….Barbapapa. Barbapapa was a cartoon imported from France, in which a species of colored blobs—The Barbapapas—shapeshifted to get through a variety of different adventures. At face value, the Barbapapas didn’t fulfill any of us. My sister was easily bored by it and my brother didn’t really get it…What the three of us LOVED to do with the Barbapapas was to watch it with the sound off and try to guess what was going on. This was a way of viewing it in which we could all participate equally, because without sound, even the wisest adult could not discern with any degree of certainty what in the world was going on!

It was that very fact that certainty could not be achieved--that there was room for different interpretations--that enabled the three of us to come together in it and find curiosity and wonder and great joy.

I love Advent, for the obvious spiritual reasons that any good priest shoud love Advent…but also because, to me, Advent is a bit like the Barbapapas without the sound on. It is a time in our lectionary where we get a supremely AWESOME mash-up of images of, holy “pointings” to, and interpretations of what is going on in this time of waiting, and of what it is, exactly, we are waiting for. Last week, in our Gospel passage, alone, we had not only the image of sun, moon, stars, and waves somehow communicating the distress of the earth while people fainted beneath from fear and foreboding, but also the fig tree sprouting leaves as a sign of summer, *and* hearts weighed down with dissipation, drunkennes, and worry. Turn the sound down, flash all those images, and try to narrate it yourself…it’s Barbapapas gone wild! I encourage you to read Chris’ sermon on that passage from last week if you haven’t…he might have had a prayer with silent Barbapapa!

Today, too, we have a stellar mash-up…We have John the Baptist from the wilderness, shouting about the need for repentance…although in Luke’s Gospel we don’t hear about his cave-man-esque optics--camel hair clothing and his diet of locusts and honey---many of us have it in our minds from the times we’ve heard it in Matthew’s Gospel. Turn the sound off…and watch that for a second….Yeah….Mmmm hmmm…

Following that, we get rolling images of valleys being filled in, mountain-tops being removed, crooked pathways straightening, rough, bumpy patches being smoothed, and then… flesh and God’s slavation…Turn the sound off again and watch …

Isn’t this fun?!

What in the heck could all this mean? And how does it all hang together?

This week, I spent a great deal of time “turning the sound off” on these images. I wanted to enter that space that my siblings and I used to with the Barbapapas…A space where I silenced what the show creators were telling me was going on, so I could approach the text from a much more curious and open perspective—a perspective expecting a satisfyingly puzzling experience with joy at the end.

Turning the sound off…did *not* disappoint.

I began with the image of John the Baptist, up on a tall soapbox proclaiming… “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

In the past, the “show creators”—various interpretive influences within Christianity—have led me to hear John’s proclamation as scolding and fear-inducing. “You’d better repent if you want to be forgiven by God.” Given what comes next with images of mountains slashed and rough places filed, it becomes a foreboding warning from a wild, imposing man that God’s love is conditional…

I turned the sound off and studied that line…it turns out there is wiggle room—uncertainty—in its translation. The greek for “Baptism” means immersion or submersion... and “repentance” (metanoia) means “a change of mind…a reversal…a reformation—re-formation”…and the preposition “for,” could actually be translated as “into” or “toward.”

Hmmm..Let’s pop those sounds in…now, instead of “John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins,” we get “John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming submersion in re-formation toward the forgiveness of sins…”

That’s remarkably different to me. I wonder how it feels to you?

“Submersion in re-formation toward the forgiveness of sins..” That opens something up for me that wasn’t there before…Submerging myself in being re-formed toward forgiveness…I think of all the things that have re-formed my ability to forgive, and to accept God’s radical forgiveness of me…this vocation, parenthood, poignant friendships, deep losses…each of these spaces of my own piercing vulnerability has re-formed me into a person much more deeply rooted in the perspective of forgiveness…each of these has re-formed my ability to see and accept my own limitations and “growing edges,” and in those humbling experiences, to more readily see others who are in some way living in the wilderness, and forgive theirs too.

Turning the sound off on John the Baptist re-forms him from a frightening finger-pointer to an eccentric, yet determined, prophet inviting the world into the profound grace of journeying toward forgiveness—journeying to an eventual existence *inside* forgiveness…

How different the words of Isaiah sound with this as our invitation….Rather than a judgemental slashing of mountains and straightening of crookedness, or a patronizing filling in of places of lowliness, we are to center ourselves in the warm glow of forgiveness, let that forgiveness lead us into places of wilderness, and from that perspective, seek a level playing field. A playing field that enables all of us, together, to see the salvation of God.

Turning the sound off for me this week has made this text profoundly more relevant to the time in which we find ourselves. There is so much wilderness in our world right now… wilderness in which the “show creators” are telling us that solutions can be found on only one side, or the other…wilderness which pits democrats against republicans…rich against poor…more educated against less educated…citizen against migrant…white against brown.

In this wilderness, the show creators are telling us, there is no room for multiple interpretations…and even less room for forgiveness.

And I admit, I have often bought into the show-creators narrative. Those whose opinions differ from mine, often directly opposing mine, I allow to become people I shut down, people I stay away from, people I choose not to be curious about….or worse, people I deem not *worthy* of my curiosity.

We need to turn the sound off, and accept John’s invitation to undertake those activities or enter those vulernable circumstances which re-form us towards forgiveness.

From what place of your own vulnerability is God re-forming you? The wilderness of a fractured family relationship…of an addiction…of a mental illness…of deep grief…of the realization you cannot do all that you promised to do?

Or, if you find yourself emerging or already emerged from wilderness re-formed…to where is God calling you and your now gentle stewarding of God’s forgiveness? Can you enable God to lead you to bring that forgiveness to those wilderness areas of our community, our country, our world where we cannot move…anywhere…without it?

This Advent season, especially, may we all turn the sound off, and greet each new day with the expectation of a satisfyingly puzzling experience *inside* God’s forgiveness where joy, the salvation of God, awaits us *ALL together*. AMEN.