

There was a parade in San Bernardino, California yesterday, in the town where a couple, apparently inspired by Isis, committed an act of terrorism killing 14 people, wounding many others, and injuring our national psyche once again. People killing other people, for reasons that do not make sense, causing untold pain and anguish, so unpredictably, has shaken everybody. But in that town there was a Christmas parade, with children singing and Santa waving, and a community coming together in their hurt to affirm that life is good and the darkness that is evil will never overcome it.

There seems to be a lot of darkness in our world these days, darkness that threatens our way of life if not our lives—even human existence. This morning in the *Courant* I read that Jerry Falwell, Jr, who now heads up the fundamentalist Christian school, Liberty University in Virginia, is counseling his students to apply for concealed weapon-carry permits, so that they can “show them.” This bothered me deeply, because I cannot see Jesus condoning such a plan, to kill his enemies. Yes, we are afraid of terrorism, especially when we are starting to realize that terrorists may not be recognizable. But we must not let fear become our master; GOD is to be our Master, and the way of Jesus our guide. We are called to love God and to love our neighbors; the Gospel does NOT tell us to arm ourselves so we can kill those who threaten us.

There is a lot of heavy stuff in our world. World leaders met this week to hear the news about how the climate of our earth is changing and to discern if there is anything that we can do to stop that change as sea levels rise and species go extinct. Refugees flood out of the Middle East because their home countries have run out of food, safety, and hope. Marchers walk through the streets in Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago, and other cities to protest the treatment of minorities by police departments. Police become unsure as to how to do their jobs. Nations clash and fears are raised that wars could escalate—one world leader proclaims that we are already in World War III. Politicians shout cliches, and ordinary people escape to electronic worlds and movie imaginations.

Perhaps we all need a parade— a parade to proclaim that no matter what, God is still God and we are all God’s people. NOT ONLY THAT, let’s let our parade proclaim that God is still at work in the world in ways large and small, so that love and compassion overcome hate and indifference in this world. Can we do this? Can we make such a proclamation? We CAN, because this is what Christmas is all about. God is doing something—an unexpected change is coming, and it will be for the better.

Every time I read that passage from Luke I marvel at how savvy Luke was. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruled the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene” — Luke gave us the political lineup of the Roman world from the perspective of the middle east. Then he added the religious perspective—“It was during the time of the priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,” So we are given the names of all the important people of the world, a who’s who of the first century world. Then the Gospel tells us how the

important stuff happens—but not to them: “The word of God came to John, son of Zachariah who was out in the wilderness.”

Transpose this: It was the time when Obama was president, and Mitch McConnell was head of the senate, and Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton were the front-runners for their parties, and Malloy was governor of Connecticut, Frances was Pope in Rome, and the Dali Lama lived in India – And the word of the Lord came to a homeless person living in the woods of Winsted. Surprise! God does not always work the way we might expect.

What did John do? He went throughout the region proclaiming a baptism for the repentance of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. He was taking on the role that Isaiah spoke about – the voice of one crying in the wilderness—prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill brought low, the crooked will become straight and the rough places will be smoothed out. All this will happen and—here is the important part – all people will see the salvation of God.”

Luke makes a point of telling us that John was out in the wilderness when God’s word came to him. Wilderness is an important theme throughout the Bible. It was a place where the supporting structures of life were absent. Theologian Walter Bruggemann has suggested that wilderness was a place that could not support life—so the people had to learn to trust God to provide for them—a lesson they quickly forgot once they returned to civilization. John had learned to trust God to provide for him. And in doing so he had learned to hear the words that God was saying through him.

Many of us have to leave home and find our wilderness before we are really able to hear what God has to say to us. So long as the comfortable familiar structures surround us we are not aware of the possibility that things could be different, should be different, will be different. Wilderness is our metaphor for the places we are insecure, frightened, not at home—where we know we must depend on God. The prodigal son went to a far off country to find a wilderness that could make him come to his senses. Jonah’s wilderness was in the belly of a whale, Elijah spent time in the wilderness running from Jezebel. Sometimes just reading the newspaper can cast us into our wilderness.

John called the people who would listen to him to repent—which is not some moral retort about being sorry for doing something wrong. No, he was calling them to see the world in a different way, to experience a reality that they previously had not known even existed. To repent literally means to turn, to face a different direction, to move toward a new goal. John was saying, “The parade is about to come down through this wilderness, so make ready or you will miss this new thing that God is doing. Prepare your wilderness, for God is coming into your life and your world will never be the same.

Where is our wilderness? How are we preparing for God’s parade there.? The Bible has made it clear that God comes into our lives, not where we are strong, but where we are weak. It is

here, in our emptiness and aloneness, that we must make ready. What that preparation is for one person is surely different than for the next. But God is coming, and the former world will end. This world as we know it is becoming compost for the new world that God has been trying to give us all along. And what an amazing world it is! It was always there, always before us for the taking, but we have always found reasons to refuse it. Jesus spent his whole life describing that kingdom to us, but it was a lot more difficult for us to live in than we first imagined. It was a world that demanded a lot of togetherness--more than most of us are comfortable with. Not just worshiping together but living in community with others, making decisions together based on precepts like love of neighbor, forgiveness of unrepentant sinners, faith that the future with God can be trusted. The new world demands a much greater sharing of resources than we had been willing to allow. It holds people accountable, not only for what they have done but for what they have refused to do. This world required that admission be open to everyone who wanted to come in--even those we might wish would stay somewhere else.

Be aware of what God is doing, of how God is coming into your life. God comes to each of us in surprising ways, at times when we least expect it, often touching us where we hurt the most--bringing healing to our griefs, our sorrows, our disappointments. When the kingdom breaks in on your life be ready to respond.

We do not know the day nor the hour nor even the way in which God will come to us. But we have the promise and the warning that God will indeed come. God is with us now. God will be with us through every crisis and blessing of our lives. God is at work right now, right here, and forever. May we prepare for the way of the Lord.

(Note: Some of this sermon adapted from the sermon my husband, Rev. Woody Eddins, preached 12/6/2015 at Simsbury UMC.)