

### **“Speed Bumps”**

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was born a babe in Bethlehem, grace to you and peace.

Movie trivia question. For those of you who are fans of Angelina Jolie, what's the name of the movie about ten years old, where she plays a television reporter? Lunch on me if you get. In the movie “Life Or Something Like It,” every day at the corner of Fourth and Sanders in downtown Seattle, homeless Prophet Jack, played perfectly by unknown actor Tory Shalaub, would scramble onto his crate, thrust his arms into the air, arch his back, throw back his head, gaze into the sky, and then prophesy, “I see and I say.”

One day television reporter Lanie Kerrigan, played by Angelina Jolie, happened by Jack's pulpit. She tossed a few coins into his coffer and in return received a disturbing message. Prophet Jack prophesied that the Seattle Seahawks would beat the Denver Broncos 16-13, that it would hail the next day, and that on Thursday Lanie would die. She dismissed Jack as outrageously loony, until he looked her straight in the eye and with utmost seriousness said, “Prophets don't joke.” Well, guess what? Jack's first two prophecies came true and this, forgettable movie, is of Jolie's character repenting of her ways and reforming her life, for she didn't want to die on Thursday.

In some ways, Prophet Jack is not a bad imitation of the hero of today's gospel reading, John the Baptist. We meet him every year at this time in our preparations for the arrival of the Christ Child. To be honest, if it were not for the fact the lectionary deposits us annually at his desert camp, we would probably barrel right on toward the manger without ever noticing him at all. But here he is again, a speed bump on the road to Bethlehem.

The gospel writers apparently think John is a pretty important character in this Jesus narrative. All four talk about him, while just two mention the Lord's birth. Luke is particularly insistent that we take him seriously because he goes to some length in noting the historical context of his ministry. According to Luke, the “word of God” came neither from imperial Rome nor for Israel's religious establishment. It did not come from someone dressed in fashionable clothes who lived in an expensive palace. Nor did it come from a corporate board room, a cloistered convent, or a university laboratory. It came from this unusual character, strange, really, whether by the standards of our day or even his own. His base of operations is out in the sticks, Bethany beyond the Jordan. His attire looks like something cobbled together by a survivalist, camel's hair tunic with a leather belt around his waist. The lunch buffet consists of locusts and wild honey.

As for this message. It is not particularly attractive, not “God's in his heaven and all's right with the world,” far from it. It is an apocalyptic vision and a call to change: “Repent...now...for the kingdom of heaven is near.” That is it. No heartwarming stories, no three points and a poem, no pious platitudes. He just stands there, roaring his simple sermons like a lion. No microphones necessary – you could probably hear him before you see him. “Repent!” echoes off his desert landscape. And prophets don't joke, remember. The words, not simply of John, but the word of God.

I remember my dear Scottish grandmother who referred to a young man as obviously fitted for the ministry because he was a “right harmless laddie.” Say what? Don't tell John. The Bible never thinks of religion as a discussion of nice, crazy, and harmless table talk. The word, rather, is described as “living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart,” as it says in the Book of Hebrews. For John, this was a time for slicing and dicing.

Now, my friends. Is that what you need on the way to Bethlehem? Be honest here. I do. And not just on the way to Bethlehem – I need to hear it regularly. For you see, regularly, I find myself caught up in the busyness of the world. There is hustle and bustle out there, not just as we approach Christmas, but all the year through. I major in minors and make mountains out of molehills, even though I know better. The news of the world is routinely horrible, and that is so frustrating. No, “peace on earth, goodwill to all” seems like a far off dream. I want to lash out.

But then comes this call to repent. Before you get to the manger, repent. John is the speed bump on the road to Bethlehem. Jack, the street prophet in Seattle says, “I see and I say...make ready for what is coming” and he echoes those soaring words of Isaiah that Luke quotes: “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth!” The picture is drawn from those massive engineering efforts of ancient Babylon that Israel would have seen during their exile. Straight new roads, not those old roads that are content to follow the terrain. For the ancients, this was a theological student, nothing must be allowed to impede or delay the coming of God.

What a message for us at Advent! “Let every heart prepare him room” we sing. Perhaps we would do well to say let every heart get out the bulldozers and backhoes, the rock crushers, and road graders. There are mountains that need to come down. Mountains of racism, sexism, ageism and any other “isms” that would block our way to healthy relationships with one another and with our Lord.”

There are valleys to be felled. Valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, grief, pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship the Saviour offers and that keep us from enjoying the fellowship of the faith. There are crooked places to be made straight. Yes, there is perversity, even among those we might never imagine. Fine exteriors mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence. There are rough places to be made smooth. Rough places that have come because of oppression and injustice. There is work to do! Bring on the heavy equipment.

Friends, there is a wonderful conclusion to all the effort. As the text has it, “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Picture it. This mass of humanity is stretched out along the hillsides overlooking this wonderful wide highway. As far as the eye can see they are spread out. Men and women, boys and girls, rich and poor, young and old, gay and straight, slave and free. Every nation, tongue and tribe, red and yellow, black and white. All are anxiously gathered to watch for the arrival of the King of all kings who is the embodiment of God’s salvation, God’s healing, God’s wholeness, God’s shalom.

My brothers and sisters, can you see it? Yes, vision is hampered. Yes, the mountains are so high and the valleys so low. Yes, the crooked places are still horribly bent and the rough places resist every attempt to smooth them. Look beyond all that. Look to God’s salvation. Jesuha, Jesu, Jesus. See Jesus in the lives of your fellow worshipers. See Jesus present in the sacraments, the water, bread and wine. See Jesus in the faces of those whose needs we seek to meet. See Jesus in the pages of scripture. Clearer and clearer the picture comes.

Can you see it yet? Look, look, and keep on looking. It will come into focus. “I see and I say” and prophets don’t joke. “All flesh, all humankind, even you and I will see the salvation of God.” Jesus. No one else. Jesus Our Lord and Saviour. AMEN.