

**Aaron Miller -- University Hill Congregation
Sunday, December 4, 2016**

Can I begin with a little Greek lesson? I'm not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Greek scholar. That was not one of my more distinguished classes in seminary. But I learned something fairly recently, that I find so helpful when reading the scriptures, listening for God. It's this: there are two words that get translated as WORD in the New Testament. One is *logos*. *Logos* is a more general word. It's a statement that applies broadly--sometimes even universally. In the soaring opening verses of St. John's gospel, he calls Jesus "the word," *logos*, who was in the beginning with God and was God. Jesus is the word over all things--the first creative word; the last redemptive word--the "life that is the light of *all* people," as the evangelist puts it with a cheerfully mixed metaphor.

Logos is more general general. The other word translated as WORD in English is *Rhema*, which is more specific, more direct. If I speak to you specifically, it's a *rhema* word, not a *logos* word. Here's the thing that's important: If we were to keep reading in Matthew's gospel (as we will), we'd hear the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. The first temptation is for Jesus to turn stones into bread and he says in response that "One does not live by bread alone, but by every *word* that comes from the mouth of God." The word Jesus uses is *rhema*. The word of God that is enlivening, that is living and active, is not a general truth, but a specific word, a personal word; a word that gets inside of us, gets worked into our bones and muscle, nourishing us to live the lives of hope, peace, joy and love that Jesus calls us to.

One of the things that the Holy Spirit does as we come to the scriptures is transform the general word into a specific word--which is one reason we often read

scriptures differently at different times in our lives, or even hear it quite differently than the person sitting beside us; it's why lots of passages of scripture don't strike us as being especially useful for faithfully living in the way of Jesus, and yet Paul can say without a blush that all Scripture is useful for just that. The Holy Spirit does that work in us and for us. When we come to the Scriptures, openly and prayerfully, we're encountered intimately and personally by the God who insists on being intimate and personal with us. It's what we need. It's what brings life.

It's why, when we hear John, all camel hair and locust breath, bellowing into the wilderness, his words are not just for "those days," then, as the passage begins; they're for these days, now. When we hear the call to repent because the kingdom's at hand we might well feel our pulse quicken, as we're called out of the everyday, out of the direction we're going, and into a new way. The revolution that John began in "those days" is not a dusty story, a long time ago and far away, it's a present reality for those of us who have been caught up in God's wild dream for the renewal of all things. When John comes among us, trumpeting the straight paths of the Lord, beckoning us into the wilds of God's grace, it's an immediate and present dare to join in God's kingdom revolution! The wild-eyed prophet will not stay politely elsewhere.

John's words come roaring into our time and place, soaring over and through the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us, to land right here, right now. God will only be God-with-us, not God-generally; God's kingdom isn't just coming somewhere else, or some other time--it's at hand for us, in our time, in our space.

Here and now, John calls us to repentance; not to a general or half-hearted admission that we don't always do quite what God would have us do (even though we're basically good people). Repentance is a political word; it's about pledging

our allegiance to one way over another. Repentance is an almost reckless willingness to give up *whatever* weighs us down, the sin and junk we carry around, even the things in our lives that we really do enjoy but are at odds with the kind of life that Jesus has called us to, in order to live that life and no other. It can certainly feel reckless when God calls us into the way of heaven's kingdom; it can feel wildly contrary to everything we've been taught and known about the way the world is, about what our lives are for, about who we are. It's worth reminding ourselves that the beloved baby that we're waiting for in this season is the same one who will call us to give up our lives for his sake and the sake of his kingdom.

John's words demand that we take a look at our lives and pay close attention to the places we're trying to keep for ourselves, the corners we've roped off to try to keep thief-Jesus out. John's words demand that we consider the unsettling possibility that we're the ones he calls a "brood of vipers." When I hear him tell the Pharisees and Sadducees that the important thing is not titles or degrees or inheritance or outward performance, I can't help but get a little bit antsy. It comes as a not-altogether-welcome reminder that my laurels are not sufficient to be rested upon. Jesus wants fruit-bearing trees! Not artificial ones, no matter how artfully displayed. Jesus doesn't want a pile of chaff; he wants the good stuff, the grain that will grow and nourish and produce more grain, and he's ready to burn the other stuff away.

As those who have been caught in the dragnet of God's grace, these words are for us.

That said, I've always resonated with Frederick Buechner's insistence that the gospel is bad news before it's good. Maybe it's my temperament, but I can't help but feel John's words as awfully heavy. I mean, we're a long way from "It's the

most wonderful time of the year," here. It's hard to imagine John the Baptist singing *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. His words remind us that not just this season, but this whole Christian life we've been called into, brings us into close, risky contact with the God whose ways and thoughts aren't our ways and thoughts.

When the prophet's desert cries land among us, it's hard to avoid the truth that we are still the ones who need to be called out of our ways and into God's; that we are the ones who need to feel the freshness and cleansing of grace; that we are the ones who have branches that need pruning--branches of hopelessness, discord, anxiety and selfishness--so that new growth of hope, peace, joy and love can sprout unexpected.

When John preaches, I know that there's chaff in my life that doesn't give God glory, that is essentially useless, and that I need the refining love of God to burn away. It doesn't make me real happy to hear that, and it can be painful to be confronted with the truth of my own brokenness, my own short-falling--especially as someone formed by a culture that has eagerly bought into the lie that we are only really what we make of ourselves.

But when we allow those words to land, not bat them away in self-defense; when we let our hearts and ears be opened, not closed and hardened, to John's call, we begin to see through the bad news to the good. We begin to hear and know that the One who calls us out of our lives, to forsake our lives for his sake and the sake of his kingdom, promises not that we'll die, but that we'll truly live! Life abundant, life that is truly life--eternal life, starting now: that's the promise!

The One who truly calls us to repentance, to go another direction, calls us in the

direction of life, into a new way of being in this world, a way of unexpected, impossible hope, peace, joy and love. If we heed John's call into the wilderness (a place of risk and testing and examination, away from the comforts we cling to), we come trusting that we are going to be encountered by the God who doesn't just want to make some minor upgrade, but wants to renew us, to do in us and through us more than we could ever imagine! More than we would dare ask!

When we allow ourselves to hear John's words, if we'll let the Holy Spirit bring them to life in us, we don't hear just the call to come and be cleansed of the junk in our lives (which can feel kind of oppressive); instead we begin to hear the promise that God's healing and cleansing waters are for us, that grace and mercy and love flow from the throne of judgment--we hear, as if for the first time, the invitation to come to satisfy our deepest thirsts, to receive the waters of life and bathe ourselves in them.

If we'll hear the urgency of John's words, if we'll allow the Holy Spirit to set them alight in us we'll see that our pruning God is *not* a reckless gardener, but the One who prunes away exactly what needs to go so that there can be new life, fresh fruit. When God's word gets a hold of our lives we are like trees planted beside streams of water, bearing fruit in every season, the psalmist sings. John's words remind us that even in these lives, which are sometimes more wilderness than living waters, it's God's desire to make us signs and symbols of the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. (There's a mission for the church!)

If we'll receive the promise the promise of the Holy Spirit, not in fear of what we might be called to give up, what might be pruned away, what might be caught in the flame of God's love, but hearing the *freedom* we're being called to--trusting that God will only lead us in the way of life, that we are being made first-fruits of God's

gracious harvest, that God's deep desire is to be with us and for us, to gather us to Himself--then we'll begin to recognize the true wonder of this season, it will dawn on us again like light in the darkness. We'll see anew the hope, peace, joy and love that is--by the grace and presence of Jesus--breaking into the world, into our lives, even now.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.

Amen.