



From the Pulpit: November 19, 2023

First Sunday of Extended Lent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Mark 1:1–8

O Loud and Lavish Lover of the awkward...

*O Loud and Lavish Lover of the awkward,
the shy and scared, the socially inept,
open our eyes to all their silent beauties.
May we not miss the faithful hearts among us,
not full of many words, but big with love.
May we never idolize exalted speech.
Bless us in our stuttering wordlessness.*

As you've heard from Katie and our fearless Advent candle lighters, Advent is going to be six weeks long starting today. Now you should know that most of Christendom is horrified that we're celebrating the First Sunday of Advent on what's supposed to be the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time. If anybody asks you about that please tell them to mind their own business. Using a common Advent text from the Gospel of St. Mark, the first verses:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight,'" so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The English word "Advent" comes from a Latin source which means "to come," because Jesus is the One who came down to Bethlehem so long ago, and the One who will come again.

To know exactly whom we are awaiting during Advent, Vancouver poet Diane Tucker has written *Forty New O Antiphons*.¹ An antiphon is simply a choral response, and if you want to know about the history of *O Antiphons*, you can look at the Worship Notes at the end of the bulletin, but not during this sermon.

Ms. Tucker's *New O Antiphons* are all seven-line prayers aimed at Jesus, the One Who Came to Bethlehem. Each one begins with a clever descriptive address to Jesus, to help us think in new ways about who he is and what he does ("O Loud and Lavish Lover of the Awkward and the Shy") and then each one concludes with an earnest plea that Jesus do something important for us ("Open our eyes to all their silent beauties"). All these prayers feature a bold and demanding imperative: "Jesus! Listen! Please! Pay attention! Open our eyes!!!"

This particular prayer gets Jesus just right, doesn't it? "O Loud and Lavish Lover of the Awkward and the Shy and the Scared and the Inept." Because Jesus was

¹Diane Tucker, *Forty New O Antiphons*, *The Christian Century*, November 30, 2020.

indeed loud and lavish in his love for the least, the last, the lost, the lame, the leper, and the loser.

Maybe Jesus was so deft at handling the awkward and the socially inept because he grew up with them. One of the harshest questions you can hurl at a person is this one: “What’s the matter with you? Were you brought up in a barn?” When people asked Jesus that question, he always said, “Well, yeah! As a matter of fact, I was!”

Plus, his older cousin was John the Baptizer, maybe the most awkward denizen of first-century Palestine. John wasn’t shy, but he most certainly was socially inept. Mark tells us that John scorned the urbane but crowded city for the wretched, barren desert between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea which was almost uninhabitable because it gets two inches of rain a year. Nobody lived out there but John. He was a loner. He was an outsider. He was a misanthrope.

Mark also tells us about John’s eccentric diet and drag. Locusts are crunchy and disgusting but if you dip them in honey, it masks the grody taste if not the crunch. He wore a camel-hair coat and a leather belt.

What? A camel-hair coat and a leather belt? Brooks Brothers will sell you a full-length, 100% camel-hair overcoat with genuine horn buttons and flap-patch pockets for \$908. I always thought camel hair was just a nice way of saying expensive wool, but it turns out that camel hair is just that—camel hair. It comes from the camel’s belly, and Brooks Brothers tells me, is especially lustrous and very soft. I also discovered that Nieman Marcus will sell me a genuine Ferragamo leather belt for \$450. That John the Baptist was certainly a snappy fashionisto, wasn’t he?

That however is not Mark’s point of course. You understand don’t you, why Mark exhibits a curious preoccupation with John’s style choices? A coat of camel hair and a leather belt were prophetic attire. That ensemble was to a prophet what a motorcycle jacket bristling with silver buckles is to a biker, what a John Deere hat

and bib-overalls are to a farmer, what a tweed jacket with elbow patches is to a college professor, what a white coat and stethoscope is to a doctor.

Say a camel-hair coat and leather belt is to a first-century Jew, and she would instantly conjure in her mind an image of the old Hebrew prophet Elijah. Camel-hair coat and leather belt had the same place in Jewish consciousness as a stove-pipe hat and black beard have in

American mythology; that image evokes but one historical hero alone and no other.²

So maybe that’s why Jesus was so smooth with the other and the different, with people who can’t copy well-worn customs or put on popular styles of life. He was perpetually provoking the polite, polished, politic people by hanging out with ne’er-do-wells—**constantly**, and I mean **constantly**, on every page of the Gospels—and having a beer at the pub with tax collectors and trash

collectors and street walkers.

One time he was at a fancy dinner party where all the men wore blazers and ties and all the women wore dangerous three-inch heels and every place setting was covered up with ten pieces of sterling flatware and the table was set with candlesticks and a floral arrangement that looked like it cost about \$400, and then right in the middle of this fancy-schmancy shindig this sketchy woman comes shambling in and heads straight for Jesus and dumps a liter of expensive perfume all over his feet and then cleans up the mess with her tears and her long, lavish, lustrous, luxurious locks.

Everyone at this dinner party is utterly scandalized by this unseemly drama but Jesus, who turns to the host and says, “Simon, you didn’t even show me common courtesy when I arrived, but this woman has shown me great love.” Jesus not only forgives her indiscretion; he holds her up as a role model.

²Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), p. 126.

“One of the harshest questions you can hurl at a person is this one: ‘What’s the matter with you? Were you brought up in a barn?’”

Jesus showed a loud and lavish love for the awkward, the shy, the scared, and the socially inept. And this is the Lord, this is the Savior, this is the One We Follow. On our own, we don't want to waste our time with people like this; it's inefficient; there's nothing in it for us. But Jesus opens our eyes to all their silent beauties.

A long time ago there was a show on MTV called *True Life: I Have Autism*. Jeremy was one of the young men featured there. Jeremy can't speak, but they got him something called a Lightwriter, which speaks for him. He can tap its keys, and the machine converts text to speech, and the voice that comes out speaks his words for him and sounds a little like the device Stephen Hawking used to speak with, a little mechanical, a little spooky, but at least Jeremy can talk.

Jeremy throws a birthday party for himself, and all his classmates show up. It was touching to see this flock of high school students gather around their almost-lost friends. Jeremy didn't participate much in the festivities; it was all too overwhelming for him. He doesn't like loud noises and sudden movements and bright lights, and most of the time he retreated to his bedroom for some peace and quiet. He types the words into his spooky machine: "Happy and nervous, so I need to relax."

Near the end, he proclaims, through his Lightwriter, "I must say this goes, hands down, as the best party I have ever been to."³

I was so moved by Jeremy's classmates, who showed up at his party, and loved the awkward and the shy, and refused to miss the silent beauty of his faithful heart, not full of many words, but big with love.

Meg and Mike Revord are very involved with an organization called Gift of Adoption. Gift of Adoption raises money for families who want to adopt orphaned children. Meg has been President of the Board; I don't

³Virginia Heffernan, in a review of *True Life: I Have Autism*, "Living With Autism: The Teenage View," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2007.

know if she still is. A couple of years ago, Meg and Mike invited Kathy and me to a benefit in Chicago for Gift of Adoption. Ernie Johnson and his wife Cheryl spoke. Ernie hosts *Inside the NBA* with Kenny Smith, Charles Barkley, and Shaquille O'Neil.

Ernie and Cheryl have six children; four are adopted. One's from Romania, another from Paraguay. Ernie says he has a miniature United Nations at his house. In 1990, Ernie and Cheryl were watching the ABC show *20/20* and learned that there were 14,000 orphans in Romania who are wards of the state and need homes. Cheryl says, "We have to go over there and get one of these kids out of the orphanage. In 1992, Cheryl went to Romania, intending to adopt a baby girl with no disabilities.

"But Jesus opens our eyes to all their silent beauties."

But then Cheryl met Michael. He was almost three, couldn't talk, and had never been outside. He had a club foot. The nurse told her, "Don't take this one. He's no good." But it was too late; Cheryl was already in love. She called Ernie. Ernie said, "Bring him home."

When Michael was 22, they found out he had muscular dystrophy. He can't breathe on his own; a ventilator kept him alive 24/7. They had to suction his lungs and help him in the shower. Michael died two years ago at the age of 33, but only after his parents had given him a wonderful life—short but wonderful.

Ernie says, "Look, there's value in everybody. We don't all have to have the same capabilities. Michael is perfectly and wonderfully made. Sometimes our expectations get so high, but you give Michael a car magazine or laminate a picture for him and it's like he hit the lottery. He's whole. He's got it figured out."⁴

O Loud and Lavish Lover of the Awkward, the Shy, and the Socially Inept, open our eyes to their silent beauties. May we never idolize exalted speech. Bless us in our stuttering wordlessness.

⁴Susan Michelle-Hanson, "A Father to the Fatherless: The Moving Story of NBA Broadcaster Ernie Johnson's Family," *Liveaction.org*, June 22, 2015, www.liveaction.org/news/father-fatherless-moving-story-nba-broadcaster-ernie-johnsons-family/.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

We are wakeful, God, and open.
Our hearts listen, awaiting something new:
some peace, some joy,
some unforeseen hope possible
as your incarnation unfolds.
Give us advent.
Give us the quivering waiting season
on the way toward Christmas.
The day is at hand.
Nights lengthen.
We wait.
You are the one,
“the Original Oneness
which preceded galaxies
and stars and planets and us,”
and you promise again to be with us.
The “day-blind stars” (Wendell Berry)
above as much wait
for your indwelling presence as I do, and yet,
when my own small frame is
“set against galaxies
which go beyond the reach
of the furthest telescopes”
I do not “feel lost or unimportant or meaningless”
but instead am given that
“strange reaction of feeling fully alive”
(Madeline L’Engle, *The Irrational Season*).

I am fully alive as I await your presence, God.
Be light in the darkness.
Be presence amid the trouble.
Be the one who guides the way.
Count the hairs on my head, know me,
O God, and know my longings, my desires,
the hopes I carry in my pocket
all the days of my life.

Let these dreams come true,
the ones that mean flourishing,
the ones that mean thriving.

**You may use these prayers for non-commercial purposes in any medium, provided you include a brief credit line with the author’s name (if applicable) and a link to the original post.*

For, the news is of street battles
and battered hospitals,
military vehicles
and displaced people
without electricity, water, internet.
Violence escalates.
Tensions are stoked.
An urgent cease-fire is needed,
but airstrikes continue.
The influx of wounded people
is un-dream-able.
The lost, the lonely, the unloved.
The wounded, the warrior, the widow.
Each need your signal,
your confident proclamation of peace.
There must be a way.
There must be a way through.
Stretch out your presence,
and let even a fragile peace flourish
in the most unexpected of places.

where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.
grant that we may not so much
seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;

May such an ancient prayer be heard,
your holy ear open to such possibility.

Carry us through as we pray together the prayer Jesus
teaches us saying...