

A Voice Crying (Luke 3:1-6)

I've had a song running through my head these past few days. It's a traditional African American quartet song I first heard sung on a CD from Sweet Honey in the Rock. It's called "It's a Mean Old World," and the chorus begins,

This is a mean world, to try to live in,

To try to stay in, until you die.

Not very cheerful words, although I find myself agreeing with the sentiment. The thing is that as you listen to the song, you can't help but raise up your hands, pick up your feet, and begin to move. The tune is not only catchy, it's passionate. So something else is going on here. Yes, it's a mean old world, but people who have a song in their hearts are not defeated. They don't plod, they don't trudge; they rise up to shout, they sing!

The song goes on in one voice:

Well I get up in the morning, I read the daily news

I shake my head and lay back down at the sin and trouble too,

Some people call me noisy, I belong to the noisy crew.

I shout when I get happy, that's the way God's Christians do.

There you go! The world is a messy place. But there's this *noisy* crew. Noisy in a good way. They won't keep quiet! The world has news; the noisy crew has Good News. The world has reality TV; the noisy crew has a real life. The world has celebrities; the noisy crew has a living God. The world sings cold and still and sour; the noisy crew has a beat that makes your feet pick up and your blood run

warm. The world sees peaks and valleys; the noisy crew's eyes are on the coming of the Lord.

I want to be a member of the noisy crew. How about you? Are you with me? I know it's a mean old world. I read the same headlines you do. We're sending 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban, but only until the day when we have trained 170,000 Afghan troops who can handle the battle themselves. Then we can leave. Ummmm. Haven't I heard this somewhere before? And how did it work out last time?

And then there's Universal Health Care Coverage coming. That ought to be good news, one would think, except that it's not exactly universal, it's not going to make anybody healthier, and it doesn't cover procedures that are controversial. Am I missing something here?

And there's my own little headline. The other day somebody stole a UPS package from my doorstep, a package containing a Christmas present I can't afford to replace. I went to the UPS website to file a claim and discovered that I can't file the claim without information from the shipping label. Ummmmm. I never got the package with its shipping label, so how exactly am I supposed to read from the shipping label? Am I as stupid as I look on this? Or does somebody just not want to hear about it?

It's a mean old world and I don't always know what to do or say. I do know that there has to be a better way. The world still needs to hear from a voice crying in the wilderness. But what voice? Whose voice is missing from the cacophony of experts and opinionators? I'm no expert on foreign policy nor health care and it doesn't look like I'm winning any points with UPS. But does that mean I have to be silent? Whose voice is missing?

There is a voice straining to be heard from behind our text this morning. It is a joyful voice: *The Lord comes. Let go your cynicism and fear. Stop gritting your teeth. Your time has come!*

Are we ready to proclaim as the prophet proclaimed? You see, the way made straight for God runs straight through each of our hearts and there is no other way. Nobody's going to walk it for us! The mountains are mountains of our fear. The valleys are valleys of our suspicion. None of us, I am sure, wants to be naïve or shallow about things that matter. But among the things that John urges us to repent of, surely, surely, we of all people can repent our *silent joylessness!*

How many of us can truly say we have taken a chance on God? Instead we behave as though there's not enough of God to go around – not enough goodness, not enough love. How many of us have actually asked, *Let me be a voice crying in the wilderness!* I mean can we ask, as C.S. Lewis once asked in his book The Joyful Christian, *Come, God, take all of me. Don't just prune around the edges so I look good! Take all of me – the good and the ill – the whole outfit -- and give me a new self instead – your Self. Let my voice become your voice.*

Think about it! Whose disciples are we? Our Lord was accused in his lifetime of being a drunkard and a glutton and a disobeyer of Sabbath rules! Why? Because his enemies couldn't stand the sight of someone who was not helpless and joyless! If he's not crazy, he's smoking something!

The other day I went shopping for groceries. Outside the entrance to the store was the obligatory kettle for donations for the needy, and next to the kettle was a young man with a Santa hat tolling his bell. It's the season, so I pull my wallet out to do my part. But then I stop for a sec by the kettle and look at this young man. He's leaning against the wall and tolling his bell down here making these *mournful* notes. It takes some work to make jingle bells sound like funeral bells, but he is doing a pretty good job. So I ask him if I can make a suggestion. I suggest that he try ringing his bells like he means it and look people in the eye and wish them a Merry Christmas and see what happens. People respond to joy, I said; people respond to conviction. Well, he looks at me like I have two heads and a tail behind me. So I ask him if I can ring his bell for a moment. Sure, he says, be my guest, ring away. I take his bell and ring a bit *like this* and I start with the Merry Christmases, and sure enough, the next two people stop and put

something in the kettle. I hand the bell back to him, wish him a Merry Christmas and head into the store.

I don't know what he thought of me, but on the way out he points his bell at me and says out loud to me as I pass – *Merry Christmas to you, too.*

To paraphrase Mark Twain: *Try being joyful sometime. It will confuse your friends and confound your enemies!*

To be joyful means at least this: *to believe at the bottom of your heart that there is another way and it begins with you.* There is always a third alternative to mountains of fear and valleys of helplessness. The Lord comes: *prepare ye the way.* Of all people, we who call ourselves Christians should know that we have been sent to prepare the way, and the way is us.

Back during the Depression many years ago, Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of the city of New York. He was a character – dramatic, self-aggrandizing and a showman to be sure – but never dull. He would ride city fire trucks, take entire orphanages to Yankees games and on Sunday afternoons get on the radio and read the “funnies” to children.

One bitterly cold night in 1935, Mayor LaGuardia turned up in a night court that served one of the poorest wards in the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. After a few pretty straightforward cases, an old woman was brought before him, accused of stealing bread from the corner store. She told the Mayor that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick and she was now trying to feed her grandchildren.

The shopkeeper, himself not a rich man, just trying to keep his hand in the business, insisted on pressing charges. “My store is in a bad neighborhood. But it's the only store around for people and I have to make a living. She's got to be punished to teach other people a lesson.”

The mayor sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I'm mayor and I have to uphold the law. I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. So – ten dollars or ten days in jail.

But even as he spoke, LaGuardia reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill. "Here's the woman's fine," he said, "and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines – no exceptions – and give the money to the defendant."

The newspaper reported the following day that \$47.50 was collected from the store owner, from some seventy petty criminals, traffic violators and city policemen. And then they all gave the mayor a standing ovation as he stepped down from the bench.

That's how it is among those who know that there is another way. They repent their fear. They repent their helplessness. They repent their unbelief. They repent their joylessness. They prepare the way by preparing their own hearts for the coming of the Lord. Then they step out and declare how it is in the coming kingdom!

It is a mean world. But we don't have to be sad and silent! Perhaps the reason that the world is still so mean is that we who know better stifle our voices. Who are we after all? Are we not disciples of the one whose voice not even death could still? Who are we *not* to be a noisy crew?! What exactly is it that we have to lose?

Anyone who asks God for a "makeover" will be given one. But you do have to ask! And it will take time and faith before you're done. Sure, the headlines are full of negatives and the streets are full of slouchers. But those who ask will start putting their hands together, picking up their feet, and joining a chorus of voices singing for the coming of a new kingdom!