

IF YOU CAN HEAR MY VOICE, CLAP

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Text: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

There’s a way of calling a crowd and getting people’s attention where a speaker says, “If you can hear my voice, clap once.” If it’s a good-size gathering, and everyone’s sitting around talking, and there’s a lot of background noise, like at a wedding reception, only the people closest to the speaker will hear the instructions. However, the sound of their single-clap will reach a little further and get the attention of a few more people. And then when the speaker gives the instruction again, only this time says, “If you can hear my voice, clap *twice*,” the sound of all those additional double-claps will reach even further and get the attention of even more people. This will go on for three claps, four claps, five claps, until eventually the whole room is paying attention.

Now, if you’re like me, and you’re a little bit soft-spoken, this is a good way to get people to listen to you without having to strain your vocal cords, but it only works when more and more people join in. If people are too wrapped-up in their own conversations, you might stand there all day trying in vain to get their attention.

I think that's how it must have been for Israel's prophets, too. I think they must have felt sometimes like they were speaking in vain, trying to get the attention of people who just weren't listening, people who were too wrapped-up in their own conversations. And yet, enough people did listen to them that their words still reverberate today.

So what was it about the prophets that was so captivating? Was it their charm, their good looks, their fashion sense? Reading some of their descriptions in the Bible, I kind of doubt it. I think it was their message. I think it rang true in times of uncertainty. I think it was solid ground in times of change. Otherwise their voices never would've been heard—especially not with all the other voices clamoring for people's attention back then. Because while the prophets were busy encouraging people to turn back to God, to care for the weak and the vulnerable, to be in loving relationship with one another, lots of other voices were shouting over them—voices of greed and corruption, voices of indifference and complacency, voices of domination and despair.

But the prophets managed to break through all that background noise by speaking words of hope to people desperate to hear them—like John the Baptist, out there in the wilderness, preaching to the crowds and telling them essentially the same thing Isaiah told the exiles in Babylon, when they were convinced God had long-since forgotten them. John said: *The old life you've been living is about to be swept away. The existence you've known all your lives is about to be replaced. God is bringing a whole new reality into the world. So get ready. Open your hearts. Prepare the way within yourselves.*

That was John's proclamation, and it was heard loud and clear by huge numbers of people who came out to the Jordan to be baptized by him. Which is pretty amazing when you think about how tiny John's voice was compared to all the other voices shouting at people in his day.

And just in case we're not sure who those voices were, Luke conveniently names them for us. He gives us a complete list right at the beginning of today's reading. There was the voice of Tiberius, the Emperor of Rome; there was the voice of Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea; there was the voice of Herod, the ruler of Galilee; there was the voice of Herod's brother, Philip, the ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; there was the voice of Lysanias, the ruler of Abilene; and there were the voices of Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests of the temple.

Those were the voices that thundered across the first century Palestinian landscape, from the mountains to the sea and beyond. And what they told people was: *You have no power, your lives are not your own, you belong to the powers-that-be, and there's nothing you or anyone can do to change that.* But as loud and forceful and intimidating as those voices were, it was John's voice that got people's attention. It was his voice that made people look up and see that a new day really was dawning, and their lives

did matter, and they were not forgotten. And that's because it wasn't actually John's voice people were hearing.

Going back to that way of calling a crowd I mentioned, if that's our metaphor, then John wasn't the speaker. He was merely the one closest to the speaker. He wasn't the one telling people to clap. He was merely the one following the instruction. The true source of John's message—and the message of any prophet, for that matter—was God.

That's the only way to explain how someone like John, who, let's face it, was not known for his charm or his good looks or his fashion sense, who lived out in the desert, who, according to Matthew and Mark, wore camel's hair and ate locusts, who ranted and raved at the people who came out to see him, and who was eventually thrown in jail and beheaded—that's the only way to explain how someone like him could have a louder voice than an emperor. Because it's a voice that's been speaking for as long as there have been ears to hear it. It's a voice that's patient and steady and persistent. It's a voice that reaches one person, and then another, and then another, in an ever-expanding circle of time and distance. It's a voice that may be temporarily drowned out but can never be silenced. It's a voice that announces to the weak and the vulnerable, the desperate and the lonely, from one age to the next:

“Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

So no, I don't think the prophets were speaking in vain any more than I think we're speaking in vain when we proclaim the gospel, even though sometimes it feels that way—even though sometimes it feels like we're trying to get the attention of a world that's just not listening, a world that's too wrapped-up in its own conversations. So let's not be discouraged, and let's not lose heart. Let's have confidence instead—especially now, during Advent. Let's have faith in the one who's coming into the world, the one who's bringing light into the darkness. “If you can hear my voice,” Jesus says, “keep clapping.” Amen.