

Sharp Dangerous Words  
 December 12, 2009  
 Advent III  
 Luke 3:7-17  
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I propose to show that the words contained in scripture are radical and dangerous so that those hearing this sermon will embody the plea of John the Baptist and no longer accept the world as it is.

May the God Who Creates us...

This past week  
 I flew out to New York  
 —to preach at  
 Suzanne Wille's ordination to the priesthood.  
 And it was quite the ordination  
 an incredibly joyful celebration  
 that was even worth  
   traveling through O'Hare airport  
 in the eye  
 of two colliding snow storms  
 just to be there.

But the thing is---

I am not  
 a particularly happy air traveler.  
 It is in so many ways  
   (as Helen Poot is want to say)  
 —such an all or nothing proposition—  
 don't you think? (pause)

The morning of a trip,  
 anxiety is birthed in my body  
 and then grows  
 and multiplies as  
 my time in the airport expands.  
 Two years ago  
 I had my right knee replaced  
 and so now  
 going through security  
 I always set off the alarm  
 and always require  
 a "female assist".

My trip to Warwick, NY—  
was no different.  
Except this time  
in addition  
to being wanded and patted down—  
my quart size bag  
of personal hygiene products  
attracted attention.  
Apparently my hair thickener—  
(although containing less than 20 ml)  
was in a bottle  
that could hold up to 150 ml  
—the same with my toothpaste—  
and even though  
they both fit  
quit nicely  
in my quart size zip-lock—  
both were confiscated  
and I was roundly chastised.

Then another security official  
picked up my suitcase  
and informed me  
that it too  
needed to be searched.  
There were some items in my suitcase  
that raised suspicions  
when it was scanned.  
So,  
as I endeavored  
to put my  
boots, bracelet and belt back on,  
the agent rummaged through my bag—  
removing my vestments,  
my clergy shirt,  
my collar  
and then  
poking around  
down below my running pants  
he found “the items” in question.  
His hand emerged  
with my Prayerbook/Bible  
and then  
he went back in  
and this time  
came out with Eugene Peterson’s,

The Message.  
 The man delicately  
 held out these two brick like books  
 —and I looked at him with astonishment---  
 “My Bibles?  
 You needed to search my bag  
 because of my Bibles?”  
 “Yes Ma’mam,” he said.  
 Then holding them warily  
 he asked me earnestly,  
 “Is there anything  
     [contained]  
 in either one of these  
 that is sharp, pointed, or dangerous?”

In response,  
 my mouth dropped open,  
 and I was momentarily speechless  
 and then all I could think—  
 was---  
     well for starters  
         there’s the Magnificat,  
             and the words of the prophet Isaiah,  
             the gospel of John,  
 and don’t even get me started on Jeremiah  
 —and didn’t Annie Dillard  
         write a whole essay on [wearing crash test helmets in church because of  
 the radical nature of the Gospel?

But because  
 he looked like a man  
 who didn’t have much use  
 for metaphor---  
 I merely nodded my head  
 and resisted the  
 urge to start preaching  
     then and there.  
 Instead I took my newly searched suitcase and was on my way.  
 And all I could think was  
 here I am  
 in airport hell  
 and sermonic heaven.

So—is there anything  
 that is  
 sharp, pointed and dangerous

contained in this book?

It is  
 nothing more and nothing less  
 than the word of God,  
 and God's proclamations  
 are a far cry  
 from soft, fluffy, bedtime stories.

The words of scripture  
 are radical,  
 they are dangerous...  
 just ask John the Baptist.  
 Just listen to this man  
 crying in the desert.

He, like all the prophets,  
 utters God's truth,  
 holds nothing back  
 –declares what God wants said.  
 For prophets  
     are not predictors of the future,  
     they are declarers of the present.  
 And God has a sharp message  
 for the people of the day.  
 Then and now.

The people have  
 come out to the river Jordan  
 for a baptism of repentance.  
 John comes at them  
 with sharp, pointed words,  
 "You brood of vipers!"

Because he knows that some of them—  
 many of them—  
 have become complacent,  
 believing that  
     being descendents of Abraham  
     is enough.

No life-changing action is necessary—  
 in their minds,  
 a heritage and an ancestry is enough  
 to secure their rightful place with God.

John is clear—

he cares about blood-lines  
 about as much as he cares about stones.

Rather John cares about  
 how they act,  
 and how they interact.  
 How they treat each other  
 and how they make their money.

He wants them to see  
     and to know  
 that their world  
 as it is currently constructed  
 is not okay.  
 He doesn't spend time on theory and ideals.  
 He is concrete and to the point.

If you have two coats.  
     Give one coat away.  
 If you're collecting taxes—  
     stop extorting people.  
 If you're a soldier  
     stop using your power to intimidate  
 In essence  
 quit abusing each other  
     and taking advantage.

Quit looking out for yourselves first  
     and disregarding one another's needs.

This all sounds  
 well and good  
 as long as  
 we are confining our conversation  
 to the actions and the behaviors  
 of our forebears from 2000 years ago.  
 But it starts to get sharper,  
 more pointed  
 and truly dangerous  
 when we say—  
 well now what about us?

What about us indeed?  
 How many coats do you have?  
 To which I answer—  
     -well are you talking about

summer coats, winter coats,  
     spring jackets or kayaking cags?  
 Seriously---now  
 what do we  
     in our own lives  
 need to part with?  
 Live without—  
     and plain ole stop buying?  
 Is that it---  
     is this really  
 all about just buying and consuming  
     or is that just  
     the thick icing hiding the cake—  
 John's challenge  
     is bigger than what we buy or give away.  
 John challenges us  
     to go deeper  
     to no longer accept our world as it is.

Isn't John inviting  
 us  
 into a better way to live,  
 that is rooted in compassion and justice.

The NY Times just ran an article about  
 a Reformed Church in Highland Park, NJ  
 that's working with immigration  
 to help local Indonesians with expired visas  
 stay in the county.  
 It started when members of the Indonesian congregation  
 that worships at this church  
 began to ask  
 if they could spend the night at the church  
 immigration was raiding and deporting,  
     and people were scared.

The congregation got involved.  
 Now not everyone was on board at first  
     --some members of the Reformed church resisted.  
 Member Rich Lord said,  
     'as a construction worker  
     who is directly affected by immigration,  
     it's very hard.  
     I feel like they're taking my jobs away."  
 But his Christian faith changed his mind.

“There’s pregnant women  
 so desperate in Mexico  
 that they’re willing to cross the desert  
 so their child will be born in the United States”  
 he explained.

“And as a Christian,  
 I have to remember that Mary,  
 the mother of Jesus, had to flee her homeland.”  
 The word of God  
 helped him see the world as it could be,  
 and it changed him.

Is there anything in this book that is  
 sharp, pointed or dangerous?

(pause)

These words are radical,  
 these words are dangerous—  
 these words are pointed  
 and if we read mark, learn  
 and inwardly digest these words—  
 they change us.

And that my friends  
 is a dangerous proposition  
 —because then we can imagine the world as it could be.

And as people of faith  
 We cannot be satisfied  
 with our world as it is.

These dangerous words  
 call us to something more.

God calls us—  
 the flawed, frail human beings  
 that we are—

God calls all of us  
 to something more.

(pause deep breath---and then go...)

“Prepare the way of the Lord—  
 Make straight a highway for our God.”  
 That is our hope that is our call.  
 Amen.