

A voice crying out in the wilderness...whose voice is it? What is it crying out?

A couple of weeks ago my husband Curt and I were in New York visiting our son. We took public transit pretty much everywhere we went. Throughout the whole transit system we saw these signs posted by the dept. of homeland security:

If you see something, say something.

You might be familiar with this security campaign as a response to the terrorism threat in the wake of 9-11. It asks citizens to partner with law enforcement by watching what's going on around them, by noticing "behavior reasonably indicative of criminal activity related to terrorism"...things like noticing "an unattended backpack in a public place or someone trying to break into a restricted area".

So law enforcement is asking the public to watch for signs of suspicious activity and to report them so that the police can act where they are needed. The idea is that when we all participate we can create a safer environment for everyone.

A prophet is someone who watches for signs, who pays attention to what God is doing in the world, who speaks out, who gives warning, who interprets signs and who calls for action.

We mark the season of advent by taking a posture of watchfulness and preparation.

We are invited to reflect deeply on how we follow Jesus Christ. on how we prepare the way, how we prepare the ground for God to dwell among us.

John is kicking up a lot of dust out in the wilderness. The powers that be are concerned enough to send some people out there. They want to know who John is

And when they ask him,  
John's response is to self identify in relation to who Christ is.

He is not the light, but one who came to testify to the light.  
Not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet,  
But, he says, "There is one coming after me" and  
"I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal"

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."

John identifies himself, humbly in relation to Jesus,  
And testifies to Jesus.

This is what we are called to reflect on in this advent season...who we are in relation to Jesus Christ and how we are called to testify to the Light.

Of course this leads to questions about the nature of Christ, the nature of God with us.

The prophet Isaiah describes God's nature eloquently in our Old Testament reading today...where God is imaged as one who cares deeply for the world, for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives  
This is a God who will put things that have come apart... back together again  
A God who is a lover of justice, a hater of wrongdoing  
One who is Faithful, forgiving, a giver of gifts.  
One who saves us and makes things right and does this in tangible, concrete beautiful ways.

"He has covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland and a bride adorns herself with jewels"

This robe, these jewels are made of healing and restorative justice.

These are the things we are to testify to.  
Be a witness... testify to this light,  
Be a voice crying out in the wilderness...against oppression, for justice.

In those days the wilderness was an image people could easily relate to.

They lived on the edge of the wilderness or they had been lead away from home as captives through the wilderness.

But what is the wilderness equivalent for us today? This time of the year a favorite response of the church seems to be the wilderness of Christmas consumerism. A consumerism that robs Christmas of it's true meaning.

This advent it occurs to me that we have bigger fish to fry than our addictions to Nordstrom and Target.

A wilderness is a place where it is easy to get lost and hard to find your way back out. And we are living in that kind of place right now.

We have come to a point in our history, where it is abundantly clear that we have an enormous problem in our country with racism, that manifests itself in police brutality, a vicious cycle of poverty, discrimination, hopelessness and fear.

Mennonite Feminist theologian Hannah Heinzekehr says:

“As the high profile decisions in the Michael Brown and Evan Garner cases have illustrated to us over the course of the past weeks, we cannot certainly claim to be living in a “post-racial society.” ...”For white people to claim “colorblindness” or to suggest that either of these two decisions... had nothing to do with racism, is a travesty. For those of us who are white to deny and ignore the presence of white privilege is not only false... it’s deadly”.[w.femnite.com/tag/racism/](http://w.femnite.com/tag/racism/)

If we take seriously our identity as Christians it is time for us to testify, to speak out, to say to the rest of this country...

”Something is desperately wrong, it’s time to take a new approach, we still have a big problem with racism.

We have to be willing to be the voice in the wilderness.

We have to be willing to take a good hard look at what we have learned about racism and find new ways to testify to God’s power to heal and restore justice.

Black columnist Eugene Robinson writing on racism in the Washington Post says:

...” no one should have expected Obama to magically eliminate the racial bias that has been baked into this society since the first Africans were brought to [Jamestown in 1619](#). The stirring words of the Declaration of Independence — “[all men are created equal](#)” — were not meant to apply to people who look like me. The Constitution specified that each slave would count as [three-fifths of a person](#). African Americans were systematically robbed of their labor — not just before the Civil War but for a century afterward, through Jim Crow laws and other racist arrangements.

Blacks were deliberately denied opportunities to obtain education and accumulate wealth. You knew all of this, of course. I recite it here because there are those who would prefer to forget.”

I think the question we face as white Americans today is not are we racists...many of us are good well intentioned people who do try our best to love our neighbors as ourselves, but the more important question is how does our culture shape our cultural biases?

Maybe it's time to reframe the question, maybe the question is not are we either prejudiced or unprejudiced, but rather, are we more or less prejudiced, based on our upbringing and experiences.

We can testify to the light of Christ by engaging in a dialogue with ourselves and with each other that helps us to uncover and examine our prejudice and it's impact on society.

I'm going to tell you a little bit about what I've been thinking about in terms of my own life this week. I hope it will encourage you to do the same and that we can all begin a dialogue on where our own racial bias exists and how racial bias is impacting our nation today.

My son in New York who I mentioned earlier, is studying city planning. After the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri he posted a piece on how the urban planning of places like Ferguson contribute to the wilderness of racial segregation and cycle of poverty we are entangled in.

The article explained the process of deed covenants that were used to create racially segregated communities. These covenants made it impossible for people who were not white to own or rent property in a particular community. They were common practice in much of the US from the 1920's to the 1960's. They quietly created segregated communities and contributed to the cycle of poverty for people of color by prohibiting home ownership and upward mobility and by creating communities of isolation.

I had heard that the community I grew up in in North Seattle had a racially restrictive clause in it's covenants, so I did a little research this week and found out that the vast majority of mostly white neighborhoods across the whole city of Seattle had these covenants, that the city I grew up in was segregated by design.

Now, I consider myself to be a pretty politically aware person so I have to ask myself how can I be 51 years old and not know until this moment that the city I grew up in was deliberately racially segregated?

I have been living my whole life thinking I grew up in the Northwest where there was no racial discrimination or segregation and now it has been revealed to me that that is utter nonsense.

So the big question now for me is...How can living in a place physically set up to separate and categorize people as us and them not have influenced me?

What can I, as a follower of Jesus Christ do about that? I can seek out the help of others, find places where I can build relationships with others who can help

me kindly and gently to affirm my goodness as a person...and at the same time to uncover the racial biases that I absorbed by living in an isolated environment.

This is the gift I receive from working with the Resurreccion community. I started this relationship thinking I had something to give to them...what I have found is that the gift they give to me is far greater than anything I could ever have imagined.

They give me an opportunity to deeply reflect on who I am in relation to Jesus Christ, the opportunity to work together for restorative justice, the opportunity to discover what my prejudices are. The opportunity to work along side of people who are impacted by an unjust system that I benefit from.

On the recent police violence against young black males Sojourners President Jim Wallis says:

“Many white Americans tend to see these problems as unfortunate *incidents* based on individual circumstances.

Black Americans see a *system* in which their black lives matter less than white lives.

That is a fundamental difference of experience between white and black Americans, between black and white parents, even between white and black Christians. The question is: Are we white people going to listen or not?

White people need to stop talking so much, stop defending the systems that protect and serve them, and stop saying “I’m not a racist.” If white people turn a blind eye to systems that are racially biased, we can’t be absolved from the sin of racism. Listen to the people the criminal justice system fails to serve and protect; try to see the world as they do. Loving our neighbors means identifying with their suffering, meeting them in it, and working together to change it. And, for those of us who are parents, loving our neighbors means loving other people's kids as much as we love our own.”

This is what we are called to reflect on in this advent season...

Who are you in relation to Jesus Christ and how are you called to testify to the Light. What do you see in the wilderness of our time that needs paying attention to? What can you do to prepare the way for God’s restorative justice to come into the world, to put an end to the systems that discriminate and hurt others who lives are different than ours?

If you see something, say something.