

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS



It seems like a hundred years ago.

During my last year at seminary I was assigned to a small congregation in a slum neighborhood of Philadelphia. The man who more or less ran that little church was a taxi driver named Johnny Schmalze. Saturday nights, Johnny Schmalze would think nothing of rolling a drunk for his money. But Sunday morning, Johnny Schmalze was in church. One Sunday, after I had given the congregation a really profound sermon, Schmalze was driving me to the subway station.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" he said. "No, go ahead." "What the hell were you talking about this morning? I didn't get a damn thing out of that sermon."

Thanks a lot, Johnny! But it was a message straight from heaven that I needed to hear, coming from Johnny Schmalze's mouth. It shook me. Schmalze was telling me in his own unique diplomatic way that I wasn't getting through to the folks.

But why? Can't these people understand English? Looking back now, I can see better than I could then, that I was giving these people words. I was showering them with talk.

But I did not have a voice.

Sure, they could hear my voice. But my voice was so full of me, that they could not hear the voice of God. It took some years to even begin to understand what it means to have a voice--- to be a voice, and to pursue this gift.

***"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
Make his paths straight!"***

Luke 3:4



A voice crying in the wilderness. A voice so clear, so true, so alive, that people were willing to leave Jerusalem and the towns and villages of Israel, and journey to the middle of nowhere to hear this man. What motivated these people to lay down their tools and close up their shops and houses, and spend days on end in that insect-infested, uncomfortable place?

John had a voice.

John was a voice.

Once you heard that voice, it haunted your soul, it burned in your heart. You found yourself telling your friends, "You'd better go out there and hear this guy!" Nobody had seen anything like this since the days of Elijah. That voice, crying in the wilderness, was the voice of God speaking through John the Baptist.

Now let's fast-forward to the 21st Century and focus on this wilderness where we live. A bustling modern city. Lots of activity. Lots of growth. Much culture. Schools, universities, research centers. But spiritually, a wilderness!

It's like God is an alien in his own world. Churches scattered over the landscape. Yet the name of Jesus means nothing to the average person.

"If you want to believe that stuff about God and Jesus, help yourself. But don't be putting it on me! Leave me alone. I don't want to hear it!"

So where's John the Baptist when we need him? Where's that voice crying in the wilderness? Where's that Elijah prophet with a voice that can wake people up?

Well, that's what we're supposed to be. Why else does this church exist, but to be a voice crying in this wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!"?

You mean we're supposed to do what John the Baptist did? This motley crew? Us? Why, we're barely surviving ourselves, and we're supposed to be a voice in this wilderness? Who would ever listen to us, even if we did start crying, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"? They'd lock us up!

John was the last of the solitary prophets. After John the Baptist, there has never again been a prophet like John, or Elijah, or Jeremiah. The voice that once spoke through those lonely prophets is now the voice of the Lord Jesus, speaking through his Body---through fellowships like this.

It started with a motley crew of 120 ordinary folks on Pentecost. The voice of God has made itself heard, ever since, through motley crews like ours.

But notice, the Lord Jesus does not begin by saying to us, "Okay you people, go out there and start witnessing! Go out there and tell that wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.! Make his paths straight!"

No, he says, "Come here. Get close to me. Get to know my voice, until you have a voice like mine.." The Lord never sends us into that wilderness until we have a voice. Because our words have no power, until they are given what John was given, what those believers on Pentecost were given.

"You shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses."

"You shall receive a voice, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses."



Then you shall be a voice crying in this wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!"

Of course, no voice is given to those who would rather not have one. As a church, and as individuals, we can choose not to answer the call. We can say to the Lord by our apathy, "Thanks anyway, Lord, but we'd rather keep going like we are now. Let somebody else be a voice in this wilderness."

Then God will honor our decision, and move on, and raise up some other church to get the job done in our place. But it will get done---with us or without us. There will be a voice in this wilderness.

On the other hand, if we say, "Yes" to the call....

"Lord, here we are. Let it be to us according to your word."

....Then God's Spirit will begin to stir in this fellowship and in our personal lives, transforming us into a voice that will cut through the confusion and draw living souls to the Crucified One. And they **will** prepare the way of the Lord. They **will** make a straight path. And we will see growth here, both in numbers and in the power of the Spirit.

My problem back there in Philadelphia was that I had a mouth, but no voice. I was spouting all the good stuff they were giving me in seminary, but Johnny Schmalze couldn't make head or tail out of what I was saying. Because I had no voice.

So how long does it take to get a voice?

John the Baptist spent years in the wilderness before he got a voice that shook the nation. Our lord Jesus spent thirty years in obscurity before he began to speak those eternal words. On the other hand, when Jesus told those early believers, "Don't try to do anything until it comes. Wait in the city of Jerusalem until you receive power from on high," they only had to wait ten days.

How long it will take for us, only God knows. But before we go out into that wilderness with a message we first need to draw near to the Lord, until he gives us a voice.

And so he begins by saying to us,

"Clear away the clutter in your own life.
Prepare the way of the Lord in your own heart.
Make a straight path for me in your own soul.
Prove to yourself and to me that you are thirsty enough to receive my Spirit---
focused enough, consistent enough, obedient enough to the light you have".

“And when your heart is ready, I will give you a voice;

I will make you to be.... a voice.



And people out there in that wilderness will hear your voice, and be drawn to me."

Prayer: Lord Jesus, draw us so close to you that we can't help but be a voice in this wilderness. We can't face the wilderness unless that voice is coming from you. Yes prepare a way for you in our hearts, make straight the path in our souls...help us to be thirsty enough, focused enough, consistent enough, and obedient enough that we are a voice, so burning, so alive, so true that it brings true direction, true light in today's wilderness. Amen.

Maranatha Mirror

Message: Richard E. Bieber 2009

Featured Art: By Lisle Gwynn Garrity permission of Sanctified Art at sanctifiedart.org

Maranatha Mirror Messages

mmirror.net

maranathamirror18@gmail.com

586-530-6983

