

**Hearing the Prophet's Call**, December 5, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby  
Malachi 3.1-4; Luke 1. 68-79; Luke 3.1-6

*Prayer*

I watched a short film recently that was talking about church bells in Vancouver. The program showed some very old video footage, from before audio and video were recorded together, and a sound expert had tried to replicate the sounds that one *would have heard* if they could have been recorded alongside that video. There were much fewer cars on the road in those days, the buildings weren't as tall, people walked in the middle of the road, and bells greeted people when they opened store doors. The bells in the church towers were said to be heard for several kilometers in those days.

It's hard to imagine that now. Even where we are in Burnaby. It would take a very large bell and a very tall tower to be heard much more than a few blocks away. Our world is so much noisier. There are cars everywhere. Machinery creates its own noise. Tall buildings reflect and distort sound. Airplanes and skytrains make loud noises. What would a church bell add to all of that? Would anyone hear the message that the church bells used to signify? "We are gathering to worship." "Christ is present, here, now." "Something of significance is happening in this place."

We have become accustomed to noise. So much so that we don't even hear it anymore. We can walk by someone yelling and just ignore it entirely. As though it's not even there. As if the voice is not connected to anything or anyone.

"Repent! The time is near! Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins! The Kingdom of God is at hand!"

We don't hear those words anymore. It's not as though they aren't being said, however. They just get lost amidst the other noise of our busy restless world.

And the message hasn't changed in thousands of years. The prophets on the street corners (and in the churches) are *still* saying the same thing. "Repent!" "Be baptized for the forgiveness of sin!" "The end is near!"

We are being invited, as people have been called to do by these prophets for thousands of years, to make a fresh start. To get off on the right foot as we begin something.

And there are lots of new things going on.

Advent is the New Year, in the church calendar. We've only just started that. Why not start the New Year off right? Or, if you are a procrastinator, you can wait for the New Year on the calendar in *less than* four weeks now! That's another great opportunity to start something new. A New Year's Resolution. We are also still fairly new to being back at church, at being back at holding the Eucharist, and having coffee hours again. All new things—or new beginnings. And the call to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sin is a great way for us to get a fresh start.

We find ourselves in a similar situation to Malachi's audience. We are only recently back in church while his audience were also recently back in their temple. We were kept out because of COVID; they were kept out because of the Babylonians. And because their temple had been destroyed. So, slightly different circumstances, but a similar invitation to start things off on the right foot, this time around. To

focus on repentance and being purified, like silver is purified, or like a fuller bleaches cloth. Our sins can be washed away as we, collectively, make way for the coming of the Lord.

It is through this repentance that we “make way” for the coming of the Lord. The prophet prophesized that a voice in the wilderness would call out to make the paths straight—and this was in advance of Jesus’ ministry. Today we are still seeking to make the paths straight, to raise up the valleys and level the hills and the mountains. *To make the crooked straight*. This is our chance to get right with God. After all, the end is coming soon. The kingdom of God is upon us.

And that has always been the message of the prophets. The preachers on the street corners. The end is coming. Beware! And the message today is less about fear than it is about seizing the opportunity. Of grabbing this chance to make a fresh start. To get off on the right foot. To begin well. Not to be encumbered by the sins that hold us back—and this is true for us as individuals, but it is also true for us as a body, as church locally and Church nationally. And as society. COVID has given us the opportunity to slow down and really think about what “re-opening” will look like. What our “new normal” will be. This is a great gift! A great opportunity to right the wrongs of the past: to admit our failings and shortcomings and address them. To seek reconciliation. And to turn from the sins of the past and move in a new direction going forward. A new beginning. A fresh start.

But we may not hear that call. We may not recognize that voice calling out to us. We may be distracted with so many other things that keep us from heeding the prophet’s call. We may, instead, be hearing all kinds of *other* things. Distractions. Concerns. Fear-mongering. Noise. (Christmas carols.) We can’t hear the gong of the church bell anymore. We can’t hear the wail of the doom-saying prophet over the din of the engines of “progress”. (If only we could get the prophets to speak to us using the chime of our notification alert on our cell phone.)

We may need to get away from all of this noise in order to be able to hear the call of God. To hear it, and to respond without being distracted by all the other noise.

We may need to get out of the *usual* places to find God.

John the Baptist came from a family of priests. His own father was offering incense at the temple when the angel appeared to him foretelling of his birth. But John didn’t hear from God in the temple as so many of his ancestors had.

Away from the emperor and rulers and tetrarchs and even the high priests, John heard the voice of God in *the desert*. Not in the temple. Not in the courts. Not in the palaces.

Jesus, too, often went out to the wilderness to pray.

So, where will we go, to hear God’s voice? Where will we go to get away from all the noise? Especially at this time of year when the noise level is even higher. Where advertisements and Christmas songs and cheerfulness is at its noisy peak.

How will we find time in all of the chaos to *hear* God? To listen to God’s voice? To hear the call of the prophet to take time to repent and prepare—that we are awaiting the return of our King, the Lord?

We will hear many things, this holiday season. But how will we hear the Good News through all the other noise? What will we have to do to ensure that we hear that timeless call to make straight the

paths for the Lord is coming? So that we might hear the good news: that all flesh shall see the salvation of God?

May our ears be opened to the good news. Amen.