

SERMON FOR YEAR C, ADVENT 2
LUKE 3:1-6
BY TOREY LIGHTCAP
SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH
DECEMBER 6, 2009
"YENS"

Some days, a sermon requires verbal finesse and intellectual output
And a deep acquaintance with Scripture indicating
That hours were spent pouring over the texts, going through academic journals,
And having conversation with other scholars.

This is not that day.

It doesn't mean that I have not immersed myself in readings or visited with others.
It just means that I spent more than enough time thinking about John the Baptist this week.
In fact, you could say I spent so much time thinking about John the Baptist
And reading about the things we know about him,
That instead of speaking to you *about* John the Baptist this morning,
I'm going to *be* John the Baptist.

This isn't, I pray, one of those moments where the Church *tries* to be relevant
By the preacher putting on his hair shirt or eating a locust
(Although I would not be averse to a little wild honey).
When the church tries to be relevant, it fails miserably.
You can't be relevant just by *trying*;
You either have something important to say, or you don't.
John the Baptist understood this entirely; he embodied it in his calls to repentance.

The Church is either relevant, or it isn't.
The Gospel of Jesus Christ is either relevant, or it isn't.
The truth, in any case, demands a lot more than a gimmick.

And before you run screaming from this place,
Thinking that Father Torey imagines he really is John the Baptist, hear this:
The main job of the prophet –
Indeed, the only job if it's done well –
Is simply to describe the situation as clearly as possible,
So that the truth – the truth of God – is absolutely inescapable.
The prophet may face a tough crowd, with bad news in his pocket,
But it'll still be *the Word of God*.
Or the prophet may just appear on the scene, like Jonah finally did in Nineveh,
With a little *thus-says-the-Lord* ready to go,
And he might even be unsure of what'll happen next,
As surely as Jonah himself sat in amazement under a withered bush
And watched as the people of God repent in ashes.

Or the prophet might go knocking on the door of the king,
Saying, *Now is the time*,
Recognizing that while he might have a truth to tell,
What the king does with that truth is not for the prophet to say.

In any case, however it works, the prophet is like a mouthpiece.
His hands themselves may or may not be completely clean,
But he tries, as best he can, to state the specific truth.

So I am privileged to stand in this spot and to ask for God's help,
And to realize as I do so that I am prone to getting it wrong sometimes.
But when you've surveyed the territory long enough and thought and prayed
And talked with leaders in the congregation and the community
And it's all just sort of added up so that the picture is clear,
Then you have to get it out somehow – you have to tell people,
And let the energy uncork itself,
And stand back, and not dare to impede the progress of the people of the Kingdom of God.

... *YENS*.

That's right. "YENS."

As in, the desires of our hearts; the vision of God's mission for us.

What God would have us to be about.

Yens: Desires, itches, inclinations, hankerings, appetites, hungers.

"I've got a yen for an orange," you might say, and head off to the kitchen.

Well, Y, E, N, and S are the four letters standing for each of the four prophetic areas
I feel St. Thomas' is called to now either re-engage, or begin engaging in earnest.

Y is for Youth.

Youth are here, they're among us, and they serve among us in the liturgy,

Yet they are not *served*, which I find odd.

Everyone is a child of God; everyone deserves to be *treated* and *nurtured* as a child of God,

And the youth of this parish deserve a program that does precisely that.

In the age of the overscheduled family,

This would seem to be a particularly difficult thing for a church to engage –

After all, where would you make a start?

In the end, though, not doing something because you don't know how to start

Feels like pretty cheap talk.

We can and will. It's a priority now.

The concept, to me, is simple: *Life attracts life*.

Parishes grow when they have a sense of vitality within the body.

If a new family shows up with a 12-year-old and there's nothing in particular for him to do,

Nobody really to hang out with,

No structure, no program,

Then he's going to ask for something different.

If he's 16 and has his license, he'll vote with his feet and his car keys.

But plug him in to something that's vital and that feeds him for Christ,
And you'll change him for ever.

All of which leads to the question: What can we do?

We're going to start small. Not too many obligations -- just saying, *We care*.
Pizza dinners. Movies. Service projects. Getting to know each other again. That sort of thing.
January 3rd, following the service, pizza lunch. Greg Jones and Ron Brinck are our leaders.

In addition, we're all going to have to acknowledge
That programming for youth demands commitment and time and money.

Here are my four commitments.

I will:

1. *help* teach and be with youth as my family schedule allows,
2. *help* lead a service oriented youth trip to Pine Ridge in summer 2010,
3. *help* follow our youth and check in with them through their social network sites like Facebook and Twitter (if they let me); and I will
4. commit to pray for each of them each week.

I would like for you to think and pray about your own commitments in this area.

YENS. Hungers. Thirsts. Aches and yearnings.

E is for Education.

We've made some good starts into our common life together in terms of education –
The confirmation process, the Holy Land travelogue, the discussion about *The Shack*.
My sense is that people are hungry; like the people of this neighborhood,
They may be so hungry spiritually that anything would do,
But that's not much of a good long-term plan, is it?
Why eat a Twinkie when something more substantial can be had?

The Sunday School is back up online – thanks to Pat Stine and the many faithful women
Who have quietly made it happen,
And who, I hope not-so-quietly, will tromp in here next week to give us
The child's perspective on what Advent is all about.

Recognizing the success and continuing good work there,
And of the Men's Bible Study that meets in the parish hall,
We're putting Bible study for all back on the table.
Each Sunday, starting today, except when the calendar has extraordinary things happening:
9:15 a.m., with Deacon Pat, in (location).

We've found that in terms of other things, short-duration programs seem to work best,
So in the new year you will hear about four- and five-week educational cycles
That will meet either on Sundays after the second service,
Or else early on Wednesday evenings.

These will be basic, basic courses that may surprise you:
“Talking About God,” which will be an introductory course to theology,
And “Reading About God,” which will be an introductory course to the Bible.

We are also evaluating a slightly more intensive program called Living the Questions
To discern how it can best be used.

YENS. Appetites and hankerin's. E is for Education.

N is for Nutrition.

When you leave St. Thomas' today, don't just speed away in your car.
Look around you. Drive slowly down Douglas Street.
Look at the once-mighty residences, these beautiful old buildings,
That have been red-tagged and are awaiting their placquard meetings.
Old, historic homes that no one wants, that may get knocked down,
That have folks secretly living in them.
Think about the cold and the wind in these old homes in January, February.
Think about the people who move up and down these streets,
Who come in to the Food Pantry month after month ...
People, often with basic health problems related to their diet: hypertension, diabetes, etc.
(And do recall that what you get at the Food Pantry is very basic in nature.)

With a little imagination and pluck, we can start to address this.

This week, St. Thomas' applied for a \$17,000 grant through the Jubilee Ministry Center
To help create a community garden.
A project like that is large in scope, with huge potential.
The idea is that we could get a small piece of land somewhere in Rosehill
(And the City is helping with that)
On which we could construct a gardening space.

We would need to fence it, run utilities into it, put a greenhouse on it,
Fit it with equipment,
And organize our neighborhood people
So that they felt a sense of ownership and participation.
Ninety percent of everything produced from that garden could go out into this neighborhood,
And the other ten percent could go into our Food Pantry.
That's the biblical concept of gleaning
Which you can read about in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, for example in Leviticus 23:22 –
“When you harvest the crops in your land, do not harvest the grain
Along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop.
Leave it for the poor and foreigners living among you. I am the LORD your God.”

Seventeen thousand will get us a long way down the road on a project like this,
But I was clear with the Jubilee office
That, at least among those I've talked with about this, there was commitment to get it done
One way or another, with or without their help.
We should know within a few days whether that argument held water.
I hope they see that kind of initiative and want to reward it,
But I am not telling *you* this because I want *them* to respond,
Even though I *do* want them to respond by cutting us a check.
I want *you* to respond. Rise up. Make it happen. Change people's lives in Christ's name.

Please pray for this ministry. Ask to see what you might be able to do to help. And remember Jesus' words to Peter: *If you love me, feed my sheep.*

YENS. Wishes, wants, desires, and cravings. N is for Nutrition.

Excited yet?

See an opportunity to tell a friend about St. Thomas' yet?

Finally, **S is for Stewardship.**

I am very happy to tell you that we are beginning to rise to the moment. Listen to this part of an email distributed last night by Riley Simpson:

Just to bring you up to date with the status of St. Thomas' pledges as of now, the following is a summary with comparisons to last year.

A 20% increase in pledging units! [from 45 in 2009 to 54 in 2010]

A 13.2% increase in amount pledged! [from \$110K in 2009 to \$124K in 2010]

We have 33 pledges that were either new or increased for a total increase of \$35,705, compared to 6 dropped or decreased pledges totaling \$3,660. The increase/new pledges were over 60% of all the pledges received! I find this to be very encouraging considering the condition of our economy both locally and nationally.

...

The mean average size of pledge is \$2310. The median pledge is \$2400.

Also, I am aware that we have verbal assurance from several other members that their pledges, totaling around \$18,000 are forthcoming. If those materialize, the total amount pledged will be somewhere in the low to mid 140K range, which gets us back to our 2007 and 2008 levels (\$144,309 and 132,262 respectively)...

We are on the right track!!

That's a good summation of how a lot of us feel right now. "The right track." Yet we know our financial challenges will continue to be real and substantial over time. Still, this is an amazing step in the right direction.

S is for Stewardship. YENS. Our hungers, appetities, thirsts.

Perhaps another way of saying all this is that

Now that the collective appetite has been named, perhaps we can start the feeding.

We can take up the prophet roles and make it happen.

And to that there's only one reasonable response: Thanks be to God, and let's get to work!

Amen.