

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Scot Sorensen

December 11, 2011 – Advent 3

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



**The Sermon Text** — John 1:6–8, 19–28

## SERMON - “No One is Alone”

Dear friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

From Isaiah we hear these words, “Bring Good News to the oppressed,” but how shall we hear good news when there continues to be high unemployment here in Dane County and in the United States? How shall we hear good news when economic uncertainty and extreme market volatility is the new norm? How shall we hear good news when public civil discourse has been reduced to name-calling and bickering? How shall we hear good news when violence rages everywhere from Occupy protests in our cities, to the violence that continues in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and the drug violence in Mexico and Colombia? How shall we hear good news when there are so many of our neighbors who neither know where the next meal will come from or where they can sleep tonight?

Yet, the prophet conveys God’s message to the people:

*“Bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, to comfort all who mourn”*

The words are intended to bring us comfort, but that comfort seems so far from us. Words which are filled with such hope and such promise, but our reality is that we feel so alone and so helpless. As we turn our attention away from the Old Testament prophets we move forward and are introduced to John the Baptist. But at first glance, it certainly does not look like John is the one to “bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted or comfort those who mourn.”

Hear again how the Gospel of John introduces us to John. “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.”

John came into the wilderness to testify to the light. In other words, John came so that others could believe through him. As much as a sideshow John the Baptist must have been, out there by the river Jordan in his unique costume and unusual diet, he seeks to point the attention AWAY from himself and towards the one who is coming.

Yet, where is this good news for the oppressed? When will there be liberty to the captives? How shall those who mourn be comforted? For all of the words of promise and hope from the prophet, and for all of the confidence of John the Baptist of this voice in the wilderness making the

way of the Lord straight...we are struck with the harsh realities of our day which causes us to feel, if not defeated, certainly very, very alone.

I wonder if Isaiah or John the Baptist’s message was put to music it may be something like this: (“You Are Not Alone” from Into the Woods by Stephen Sondheim)

*Someone is on your side.*

*Someone else is not.*

*While you're seeing our side*

*maybe they forgot:*

*They are not alone.*

*No one is alone.*

*Hard to see the light now*

*Just don't let it go.*

*Things will come out right now*

*He can make it so.*

*Someone is on your side*

*No one is alone.*

In our season of Waiting, this Advent season, a time of lingering darkness that creeps earlier and earlier into the day. In this time of cold days we long for community. We long for someone to be on our side. We long for the light. We long comfort and good news. We long not to be alone. And so we wait...and in our waiting we discover in a very good way, we are not alone.

I want to tell you a story that a man named Paul Villard from 1966 where he tell. In 1966 Paul Villard told his story about a special friend he made while just a boy, growing up in the Pacific Northwest many, many years ago. It is a story about not being alone.

When quite young, Paul's father had one of the first telephones in their neighborhood. It was a polished oak case fastened to the wall. The number of the phone was 105. Paul was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when his mother talked to it. There was that one time when Paul’s mother lifted him up to speak to his father who was away on business. Magic!

Then Paul discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person - her name was "Information, Please" and there was nothing she did not know.

"Information, Please" could supply anybody's number and the correct time. Paul's first personal experience with this genie-in-the-bottle came one day while his mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing himself at the tool bench in the basement, Paul whacked his finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be any reason in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy. He walked around the house sucking his throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway.

The telephone!

Quickly, Paul ran for the foot stool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, he unhooked the receiver and held it to his ear. "Information, Please," he said into the mouthpiece just above his head.

A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into Paul's ear.

"Information."

"I hurt my finger," Paul wailed into the phone.

"Isn't your mother home?" came the question.

"Nobody's home but me" Paul blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?" the voice asked.

"No," he replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts."

"Can you open your icebox?" she asked. He said he could. "Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger," said the voice.

After that, Paul called "Information, Please" for everything. He asked her for help with his geography and she told him where Philadelphia was. She helped him with arithmetic and even told Paul that his pet chipmunk, which he had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then, there was the time Petey, the pet canary died. Paul called and told her the sad story. She listened, then said the usual things grown-ups say to soothe a child, but Paul was inconsolable. He asked her, "Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?"

She must have sensed his deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow he felt better.

Another day he was at the phone. "Information" said the now familiar voice.

"How do you spell fix?"

"F-I-X." At that instant my sister, who took unholy joy in scaring me, jumped off the stairs at me with a banshee shriek-"Yaaaaaaaaaaa!" I fell off the stool, pulling the receiver out of the box by its roots. We were both terrified--Information Please was no longer there, and I was not at all sure that I hadn't hurt her when I pulled the receiver out. Minutes later, there was a man on the porch. "I'm a telephone repairman. I was working down the street and the operator said there might be some trouble at this number." He reached for the receiver in my hand. "What happened?" I told him. "Well, we can fix that in a minute or two." He opened the telephone box exposing a maze of wires and coils, and fiddled for a while with the end of the receiver cord, tightened things with a small screwdriver. He jiggled the hook up and down a few times, then spoke into the phone. "Hi, this is John. Everything's under control at 105. The kid's sister scared him and he pulled the cord out of the box." He hung up, smiled, gave me a pat on the head and walked out the door.

When Paul was nine years old, his family moved across the country to Boston. Paul missed his friend very much. "Information, Please" belonged in that old wooden box back home, and he somehow never thought of trying the tall, shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall.

As he grew into his teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left him. Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity Paul would recall the serene sense of security he had then. He appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on his way west to college, Paul's plane put down in Seattle. He had about half an hour or so between planes. He spent 15 minutes on the phone with his sister, who lived there. Then without thinking what he was doing, Paul dialed his hometown operator and said, "Information, Please."

Miraculously, he heard the small, clear voice he knew so well, "Information."

He hadn't planned this but he heard himself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell fix?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now." Paul laughed. "So it's really you," he said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time."

"I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children, and I used to look forward to your calls. Silly, wasn't it?" It didn't seem silly, but he didn't say so. Instead Paul told her how often he had thought of her over the years and asked if he could call her again when he came back to visit his sister.

"Please do," she said. "Just ask for Sally."

"Goodbye Sally." It sounded strange for Information Please to have a name. Three months later Paul was back in Seattle. A different voice answered, "Information." He asked for Sally. "Are you a friend?" She asked. "Yes, a very old friend," Paul answered. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally has been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago." Before he could hang up she said, "Wait a minute. Is this Paul?" "Yes," Paul replied. "Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you." The note said, "Tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."

*Someone is on your side.*

*Someone else is not.*

*While you're seeing our side*

*maybe they forgot:*

*They are not alone.*

*No one is alone.*

As we wait in the wilderness this Advent season, we discover that we wait with John the Baptist and countless others. We are waiting for the one whose coming is certain, the light of the world who will dispel the darkness, Emmanuel, God with us who will never leave us alone.

*Hard to see the light now*

*Just don't let it go.*

*Things will come out right now*

*He can make it so.*

*Someone is on your side*

*No one is alone.*

Amen. © 2011