

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

December 5, 2021

Year C, 2 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Baruch 5:1-9](#)

[Canticle 4 or 16](#)

[Philippians 1:3-11](#)

[Luke 3:1-6](#)

+++

In the year 2018, when Stefan Löfven was prime minister of Sweden, and Angela Merkel was chancellor of Germany, Donald Trump president of the United States, and Xi Jinping president of China; when Francis was pope, Jeff Bezos was CEO of Amazon and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook; an idea came to a 15-year-old girl in Stockholm. She decided to skip school; or rather, to go on strike from school; and to go protest and hold a sign in front of the Swedish parliament. The sign said, “School Strike for the Climate.” Her name was Greta Thunberg. She wasn’t famous or powerful. But she was angry that the adult leaders of the world were letting a climate crisis happen. For three weeks she sat outside Parliament every day with her sign. And she posted on social media; and people shared her posts; and people began to join her. By late 2018 she was speaking at UN conferences and her tweets were reaching millions of people around the world.

There was something about Greta Thunberg that captivated people, and also something about her that rubbed people the wrong way. She was young, of course, and didn't let people forget it. She was diminutive and wore her hair in a braid and chastised adults for looking to her, a child, for leadership when they should be fixing the problem. She was blunt and plain-spoken. Her affect was a little different than the mainstream, and she spoke of her Asperger's syndrome as "her superpower," helping her focus with passionate intensity on the issue at hand. She didn't traffic in nuance, or congratulate politicians for symbolic gestures. "How dare you steal my dreams and my childhood with your empty words?" Greta Thunberg said to the United Nations in 2019. She could speak out against Donald Trump for denying climate change and then turn around and denounce the progressive prime minister of New Zealand for paying lip service without actually reducing emissions.

Her reach got bigger and bigger, and with it, her fame. Someone painted a 60-foot mural of her on a building in San Francisco. But she got angry when people focused on her. She was the messenger, not the message, she said. The climate was the point, not her.

In the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius, when Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod ruler of Galilee and Lysanias ruler of Abilene and Annas and Caiphas held the high priesthood, John son of Zechariah heard the word of God. He went out to the wilderness and began to baptize and preach; and people began to come.

There was something about him that captivated people, and also something about him that rubbed people the wrong way. He acted different than the mainstream, with his home in the desert and his wild clothes and food. He was blunt and plain-spoken. He didn't traffic in nuance. Next week we'll hear him greet the crowds who come to him with a cheery "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He could tell a soldier to stop extorting people and then turn around and tell the king to stop committing adultery with his sister-in-law. His reach got bigger and bigger and so did his fame. But he got angry when people focused on him. "I baptize you with water," he said, "but one more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." He was the messenger, not the message. The Messiah was the point, not him.

What makes a movement happen? How does one spark fizzle out while another lights a huge fire? Lots of people have protested climate change at their parliament or congress building and then gone home without touching a nerve the way Greta Thunberg has. Lots of people have felt a call to be a prophet and call people to God, gone to a street corner with a soap box and then gone home without touching a nerve the way John did. John, of course, was being used by God to prepare the way for God's own Son—a unique calling indeed. Personally I believe and hope that God is using the work of Greta Thunberg and others to call us as a global community to repent of the harm we have collectively been doing to each other and to the other species God has created by ignoring the clear signs of climate crisis for thirty years and more. But whether you share that belief or not, what's clear is that sometimes the things that change history the most come not from the corridors of power, not from a palace in Rome or Jerusalem or the White House or the UN Building, but from a strange man in the wilderness around the Jordan, or a teenage kid in Stockholm leaving school to go hold a sign.

What might that mean for us as we seek to be faithful here today? What can we do in our own sphere of influence, however big or little it may be, to respond to God's call to us?

Eleven years ago here at Incarnation a few parishioners on Sunday mornings noticed some of their unhoused neighbors and started inviting them to have coffee and cookies. Then they realized there was somewhere to get a free hot breakfast in Santa Rosa every day of the week except Sundays. They started buying some breakfast food, out of their own pockets at first, then other parishioners pitched in. Someone wrote a grant request and things started to snowball. Before too long we had a new ministry called Open Table. This morning, like every Sunday morning, we served a hot breakfast to somewhere around 100 of our neighbors, most of whom don't have a place to live. How else can we care for our neighbors? Who else is going hungry in our neighborhood?

Two weeks ago our congregation got an unexpected invitation to a ministry of hospitality when we learned about the chance to rent our rectory not to the highest bidder but to a family newly evacuated from Afghanistan who urgently needed a home. What doors or windows might this new opportunity open up for us as a congregation? Who else in our community needs help finding a home? Who else is a stranger looking for a welcome? What could happen if we keep opening ourselves to these questions?

Maybe something big. And maybe not. The point isn't about size and results, or at least size and results aren't completely under our control. The point is about being faithful wherever we're placed, whether we think we have the power to do a lot or just a little.

It is Advent. The voices of the prophets are calling out in the wilderness. How will we hear? How will we respond? What is being born?