

Sermon for Zion, December 9, 2018 – Advent 2

Hymns: We light a thousand candles; 114 – Emmanuel, Emmanuel; 118 – Hark the glad sound; 126 – On Jordan’s Bank

Scripture: Luke 3:1-18; Mark 13:32-37

Sermon: “Prove by the way that you live...” - Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Luke 3:1-18 (NLT)

It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Tracoonitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene. Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests.

At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had turned to God to receive forgiveness for their sins. Isaiah had spoken of John when he said, “He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him! The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.’”

When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, “You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God’s coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. Even now the axe of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.”

The crowds asked, “What should we do?” John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.” Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.” “What should we do?” asked some soldiers. John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.”

Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He is ready to

separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.” John used many such warnings as he announced the Good News to the people.

Mark 13:32-37 (NLT)

“No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don’t know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!

“The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his servants instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. You, too, must keep watch! For you don’t know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak. Don’t let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!”

Here we are, the 2nd Sunday in Advent, and what do we get, but a big dose of John the Baptist, like an uninvited guest casting gloom on the party. John the Baptist has never fit in all that well with the way we do Christmas. For us, Christmas is all Santa and Rudolph and Frosty and Scrooge. It’s all tinsel and trees, snowflakes and presents. Amidst all our cultural festivities, we forget that John is much more a part of the Christmas story than, say, Santa ever was.

In fact, as far as the Bible is concerned, John is every bit as much a part of the Christmas story as the Shepherds and the Wise Men. More, really; a careful reading of Matthew (and it is to Matthew you have to go; Luke, for whatever reason, isn’t interested in the Wise Men at all, nor are the other Gospels), Matthew reveals that the Wise Men don’t show up on the night of the Birth, but as much as two years later, when Mary and Joseph are no longer (as in Luke’s Gospel) sheltering in a stable with an infant, but (as Matthew tells it) settled with a toddler in a house.

But all the Gospels have John the Baptist, who is right there at the beginning. According to Luke, the very moment the Angel comes to Mary with the incredible news that she is to be with child by the Holy Spirit, he also tells Mary that her kinswoman, Elizabeth, is carrying a baby of her own, and is in fact six months along. Mary soon travels to Jerusalem to help out with the birth. When she arrives, and stands with Elizabeth belly-to-belly, Luke tells us what happens (Luke 1:41-45):

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

That leaping baby's name? John. And when he was given that name, at the tender age of 8 days, his father Zechariah, "filled," we are told, "with the Holy Spirit," prophesied over his baby boy (Luke 1:76-79):

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

So John is there at the beginning of Jesus' life, and he's there at the beginning of Jesus' ministry too, some thirty years later; paving the road, preparing the way. Which is what Advent is all about, after all; Advent is all about preparing for the coming of the Lord, and so is John. We need to get used to the fact that John the Baptist and Advent are inseparable, because, "God is coming," preaches John, knee-deep in the Jordan. "The Kingdom is coming," he says. "Get ready!"

'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming! Clear the road for him! The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.'

People wanted, needed to hear more about this news, and they travelled down to the Jordan in droves. And John welcomed them with anything but soothing words:

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee God's coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God..."

Now, that's preaching! "You brood of vipers!" You just don't hear that kind of language from the pulpit anymore! "You nest of snakes!" John's just getting warmed up, though:

"Even now the axe of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."

Hard words, extreme words, from a pretty hard and extreme guy. But don't let the image of wild-eyed, camel-haired, leather-belted, locust-eating John turn you away from the centre of his message, which is one we all need to hear. And here it is, right in the middle of his speech, nestled tightly between the snakes and the axe and the fire: *“Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.”* And there's nothing unreasonable about that. *“Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.”*

John thinks it is only fair, only right, only logical, that if we have indeed repented - if our lives have indeed been changed by the Gospel - if we truly have been forgiven of our sins - John insists that there be evidence of this in the way we live our lives, from that moment onward.

The surprising thing for me is the advice John gives, as to how our lives are to change. Like you, people listening to John are wondering what kind of change John has in mind. Do we need to exchange our clothes for camelskin, and our lasagne for locusts and honey? No. Listen:

The crowds asked, “What should we do?” John replied, “If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry.” Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, “Teacher, what should we do?” He replied, “Collect no more taxes than the government requires.” “What should we do?” asked some soldiers. John replied, “Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.”

Well, that's the last thing we expected to hear. That actually makes sense. That's good solid practical instruction. John calls us to turn away from our old life of selfishness and sin, find God's forgiveness, and then live in response to that gift. To share what we have with the poor. To be honest in our jobs. To not take advantage of others, and be content with what we have. In short, to live a decent life, in consideration of others, and in generosity to the needy. “Live like this,” says John, “and you'll be ready for the Messiah.” It is, when you think about it, much like what the Messiah himself had to say: “Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself,” said Jesus. “Do to others what you would have them do to you.”

It is so simple, so straightforward, that it might not seem to us like enough. But think of it in this way: I have no doubt that someone will greet you over the next number of weeks with the question, “So, are you ready for Christmas?” With John's message in mind, try this answer on for size:

“Well, I've been forgiven by God, and I'm trying to live in response to that gift. I'm sharing what I have with the poor. I'm trying to be honest in my job, and not to

take advantage of others, and to be content with what I have. I'm making the effort to live a decent life, in consideration of others, and in generosity to the needy. I've got a long way to go, but I think I'm ready for the Messiah to come." I'd love to see the reaction on the other person's face as they slowly back away. "I meant, have you put up your tree?" And I don't recommend you respond to that by quoting John: *"Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire!"*

Getting ready for Christmas – preparing for the coming of the Messiah - *is* to turn away from sin, find God's forgiveness, and then live in response to that gift. To share what we have with the poor. To be honest in our jobs. To not take advantage of others, and be content with what we have. Again, in short, to live a decent life, in consideration of others, and in generosity to the needy.

That's how we get ready for Christmas. Despite our fondness for decorations and presents and fruitcake and the rest, John's way is the only way to properly get ready to welcome Jesus. Because remember, Advent is not just about getting ready for the celebration of Jesus coming to us in Bethlehem. It is about being ready for Jesus coming again. And the tricky part is, unlike Christmas, that could come at any time.

Imagine if Christmas was a moveable feast, and not nailed down to December 25th. Imagine if Christmas would come as a surprise, no fixed date; it would be announced from the pulpit as happening any particular day of the year. "Today is Christmas," I'd say to you some Sunday morning from out of the blue. "So, are you ready?" Tree, lights, decorations, baking, presents, turkey – you've got just a few hours - go, go, go! I actually think that would be a much better way to celebrate Christmas – five hours notice. It's Christmas! Surprise! And surprisingly, that's exactly how Jesus talks about his return. It can come at any time, so you better be ready NOW.

"No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!"

It's hard to have the tree, lights, decorations, baking, presents, and turkey ready to go, 24/7/365. But of course, that's not the kind of "ready" Jesus or John are talking about. Remember, they're talking about a readiness far more important than that; they're talking about a life that is *lived* in readiness; a life lived in repentance, forgiveness, and response; a life lived in generosity, honesty, and contentment. That's what getting ready for Christmas – what being ready for the coming of Jesus – is all about. It's not about getting the lights up on time, or the right kind of tree. It's about living the right kind of *life*.

I know this is kind of a new way to prepare for Christmas, but there are lots of things coming up to help you get ready. There are many opportunities for worship and celebration over the next number of weeks, opportunities to remember what it means to live a life in the light of God's forgiveness and grace. There are many opportunities for reflection, as the story of God's coming into our midst is brought forward in prayer, word and song. And there are many opportunities for generosity, which John highlights as the real sign of the prepared life. Listen again:

The crowds asked, "What should we do?" John replied, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."

Now, we're not set up so well here for the sharing of clothing, but we have lots of opportunities to be generous, and to provide for the hungry. There's the Mitten Drive; there are the baskets we prepare for needy individuals and families at Christmas (an amazing blessing to contribute to and to receive). There is the Upper Room Soup Kitchen and Food Bank, which we support through your generous donations to our Missions Fund. There is our participation in the Canadian FoodGrains Bank, the Christmas Donation Cards for which are available after the service.

These ways and others are, I think, what John had in mind, when he told us to *"Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God;"* when he told us to *"give to the poor, and share our food with the hungry."* I think it is the best possible way to get ready for Christmas, and to live lives of readiness year-round in response to God's forgiveness, and in preparation for the Coming of the Lord.

Maybe we did need a dose of old John the Baptist. Maybe we did need a reminder to get ready, and to be ready. To receive the gift of forgiveness from God, and to live in response to that gift. To share what we have with the poor. To be honest in our work, to not take advantage of others, and to be content with what we have. In short, to live a decent life, in consideration of others, and in generosity to the needy. "Live like this," says John, "and you'll be ready for the Messiah." Despite our fondness for decorations and presents and fruitcake and the rest, John's way is the only way to properly get ready after all.

'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming! Clear the road for him! The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level. The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. And then all people will see the salvation sent from God.' Amen.