

Sermon for Zion - October 6, 2019 – World Communion Sunday

Hymns: 65 – All People That On Earth Do Dwell; All in All;

530 – I Come With Joy; 126 - On Jordan's Bank

Scripture: Luke 3:1-18

Sermon Title: The Gift of the Kingdom

*Luke 3:1-18*

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene - during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:*

*“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,*

*‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.*

*Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low.*

*The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.*

*And all people will see God’s salvation.’”*

*John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

*“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.*

*John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”*

*Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”*

*“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.*

*Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”*

*He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”*

*The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*

So there’s John, hip-deep in the Jordan, crowds along the shoreline, gathered from near-by Jericho and as far away as Jerusalem, all come to see this one called the Baptist do his thing. And what a thing it was; like a long lost prophet wandering out from the pages of the Old Testament, looking for all the world like Elijah himself come down from heaven, John had the people by the ear. It had been 400 years since the last true prophet thundered out the words

of the Almighty, but the words coming from John made it seem like yesterday (Luke 3:7-9 – “The Voice”).

*You bunch of venomous snakes! Who told you that you could escape God’s coming wrath? Don’t just talk of turning to God; you’d better bear the authentic fruit of a changed life. Don’t take pride in your religious heritage, saying, “We have Abraham for our father!” Listen—God could turn these rocks into children of Abraham! God wants you to bear fruit! If you don’t produce good fruit, then you’ll be chopped down like a fruitless tree and made into firewood. God’s axe is taking aim and ready to swing!*

This and more like it, and his preaching was like water to a thirsty world, it seemed, and people came down to the desert by the score to repent of their former ways, to be baptized, to start fresh on life’s road with a spirit renewed.

And it wasn’t just hellfire and brimstone John preached, but his messages had a surprisingly practical bent too, at times. When the people asked him what they should do, how they should live, how they should change their ways, he answered in words no one could misunderstand (Luke 3:10-14):

*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.”*

And you might wonder how or why such down-to-earth advice drew such crowds. Maybe it was because John had glimpsed something to come, something just over the horizon, something big, world-changing even, and as you listened, it seemed you could glimpse it too (Luke 3:16): *“I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am - so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”*

And soon the word “Messiah” was on everyone’s lips, buzzing through the crowd, some wondering if John could be him, and John saying, *“No, not me, but he’s coming, he’s coming. Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near. The prophet Isaiah was speaking about me when he said, ‘He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”*

And some said, “Do you think it really is the time? Do you think God’s day is here?” And others said, “Don’t hold your breath. We’ve been waiting 900 years. Maybe we’ll have to wait 900 more.” But it seemed, some days, as though everyone was holding their breath. Everyone but John, shouting “Repent,” and calling folks down to the river to pray.

But one day even John’s breath caught in his lungs, his unstoppable voice silenced, his eyes, so often focussed on some unknowable point in the distance, locked onto the face of one making his way down the bank to the river’s reedy edge. Nothing special about him, it seemed;

looked a bit like John, maybe, but without the camel-skin cloak and thick leather belt. Looked like anybody, really. But he sure caught John's attention (John 1:29-31):

*John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about when I said, 'A man is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.' I did not recognize him as the Messiah, but I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel."*

And the stranger waded over to John, and made as though to kneel and be baptised, but before he could, John knelt in front of him, and a discussion ensued between them about who should be baptising whom, but it seems the new man won, for down in the water he went. And when he came back up, well, it was hard to say just what happened next, but most people, John included, said it was like this:

*And as Jesus was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)*

And with that, this Jesus waded out of the river and up the bank and through the crowd and kept on going, right for the mountains of Jericho, with John standing like a statue and watching him go, and while nothing much seemed to change – the water still flowed, the sun still shone, the reeds still waved in the wind – something did change, something within the heart of John and the hearts of everyone there. What once was promised was now fulfilled; what the world had been waiting for so long, had come. It seemed as though the Kingdom – God's Kingdom – was here. In the person of a man. In this Jesus.

It was just forty days later when Jesus emerged from the mountains of the temptation wilderness, headed north to Galilee, and started some preaching of his own (Mark 1:15, Matthew 3:23): *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (and preaching), "The time has come! God's kingdom is already here. Turn back to God and believe the good news!"*

And so it began. And so came the Kingdom of God. Not long, long ago; not far, far away; but among us. With us. Now. The waiting is over. The promise is fulfilled. God's Kingdom is here. The Messiah, the Saviour, is come.

It is one thing to see it. It is one thing to hear it. It is another thing to grasp it, to believe it, to hold it in your hands. Many, even in Jesus' day, just couldn't get it through their heads, couldn't get it in their hearts. They didn't get it. They had waited so long, and now it was too close to see. Listen (Luke 17:20-21):

*Jesus, grilled by the Pharisees on when the kingdom of God would come, answered, "The kingdom of God doesn't come by counting the days on the calendar. Nor when someone says, 'Look here!' or, 'There it is!' And why? Because God's kingdom is already among you."*

Back in January of this year, I was told that a baby was on the way. And not just any baby; a grandchild. Many of my friends and colleagues already had grandchildren, and had

often subjected me to photos and stories of how wonderful their grandchildren are – all of the joy, none of the responsibility – and they assured me that I will be amazed, astonished, at how special my own grandchild will seem.

But I tried to temper my excitement, lest unreasonable expectations lead to unfulfilled reality. The months of waiting dragged slowly by. “No baby yet?” became the phrase with which I was greeted by all friends, parishioners, colleagues. “I’m confident the baby will come eventually,” I replied.

And then she did. And then I held her. And now all I want to do is hold her again. And to understand that love. That overwhelming, inexplicable love. For when real love comes, the realization is far more powerful than the expectation. And I am changed. I’ll never be the same again.

And so – on an infinitely more momentous scale – and so it was for the world when Jesus came. Not everyone got it. They had waited so long, had hoped so hard. And now, the Kingdom was among them. And now, the Messiah, the Saviour, was here. Not everyone got it. For some, it was just another person, just another preacher, just another man. But some got it. John, knee-deep in the Jordan, got it. Peter, with his calloused fisherman’s hands and short fisherman’s temper, got it. His little brother Andrew got it. Mary, from around the corner in Magdala, got it, and Martha and her dear Lazarus, too, and others. They understood who Jesus was, who Jesus is, what Jesus means. For them, real love had come into the world, into their lives. God’s love. And the realization of that love was more powerful by far than the expectation. And their world was never the same again. For the Kingdom was among them.

And so it is for us, here, today. For us, here, today, it is hard to believe the Messiah has come, the Saviour is here. For us, here, today, it is hard to believe the Kingdom is among us, that it is not just a distant story, from a distant time, a distant land, told in double columns of small print in a family bible gathering dust on the side table. For us, here, today, it is hard to believe that real love has come into the world, into our lives. God’s love. That the time of salvation is now.

And so to help us understand, God has given us something that we can hold in our hands. God has given us a gift. It is a gift passed down through the centuries, but made new every time we share. God gives us the gift of bread, the gift of wine. In giving us this gift, God brings us back, back through time and place, and seats us at the Table of His Son. And as we share; as we take it into our hands, this bread, this wine; as we hear the words he’d spoken; as together we take and eat, he becomes a part of us, a part of our reality, of our world. And if we get it: if we understand, maybe for the first time, maybe each time again; if – when - we see through this ritual to the very table itself, back to the one who first breaks the bread, who first gives thanks over the cup; maybe we too, like John, will say, “*Behold, the Lamb of God. I did not recognise him, but I see now he has come into the world.*” This is the power of this gift you will soon hold in your hands. The Gift of the Kingdom.

Friends: Jesus has come. The Kingdom is among you. The time of salvation is here. Repent, and believe the Good News. Prepare the way. Prepare your hearts. Hold it in your hands. Receive. Receive God’s overwhelming, inexplicable love. And never be the same again. Amen.