

The Importance of Repentance and Baptism

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John 1: 6-8. 19-18

First Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday of Advent

Lake Forest, Illinois

Please Pray with Me:

Almighty, God... We offer our Worship to YOU this Morning and Pray that it would be pleasing to You... And Lord I ask that the Words of My Mouth and the Mediations of ALL of our Hearts would Honor YOU, Our Rock & Our Redeemer... Amen!

Well, we are firmly within the Holiday Season and the craziness of this Season is surely apparent within our lives and schedules. When I offered to share a message in the middle of December I was excited to share a Christmas Message involving details of the season (decorations, gatherings, presents, etc.), because I recognize that in a lot of ways, even though I have been here on Staff for over 2 years, I am being introduced/reacquainted with a lot of you in this new role as Youth Director... So to that end it is important for you all to know that I LOVE CHRISTMAS! I love the season, the decorations, the gatherings, the Christmas Hats, the Christmas Movies, I LOVE CHRISTMAS.

But, as I was preparing for this morning, and I was reading our Scripture Texts, it became abundantly clear to me that it isn't Christmas yet. As I said we are firmly within the Holiday Season, and well on our way to this Joyous Day that will be here before we know it, but we are not there yet. We are still waiting, organizing, preparing... We are in the midst of Advent.

During Advent it is a time for the Church to prepare for the coming of Christ... It is a time of expectancy as the Day of Christ approaches and the Church celebrates the reign of God, and the presence of God being truly manifest... Advent is not a time for passive waiting and watching. It is an

opportunity to open our lives and our souls with active participation and renewed hope!!

And it is fitting this morning that we read about John the Baptist. John ‘prepared the way’ for Jesus, preaching the importance of Repentance and Baptism. One scholar describes John’s ministry *‘Like an announcer for a starring role, John wasn’t on stage long. John’s ministry is believed to only have lasted a year or so, but it was long enough to draw a crowd- and point people towards the coming Messiah!’*

John 1:6-8 (NRSV)

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

In these verses (v.6-8) Jesus is described as “light” ~~in this passage~~. Jesus is described as light, because Jesus is bringing this dark world **true knowledge**, He is setting an example of **moral purity** and Jesus is the light that shows the very presence of God!

Here we have this striking description of Jesus as light... Stated by John the Baptist...

The Gospel of Matthew describes John the Baptist in the following way: *⁴ John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*

John's garments were common to nomadic desert dwellers and thus were associated with poorer people, but were far from comfortable or fashionable attire. Locusts and wild honey were an unusual source of food, typically only consumed by people living in the desert

This is quite a vivid and unique description of an individual, but John the Baptist was a person people were drawn to and the message he delivered was gaining traction and momentum, which caused (as we read in the second part of our NT Lesson in John 1:19-28) the Jews to send Priests and Levites to find out who John was!

Who is John? John denies being the Christ (cf. v. 8, 15; 3:28), Elijah, or the Prophet. Though John the Baptist resembled **Elijah** in his rugged clothing and lifestyle (Matt. 3:4; cf. 2 Kings 1:8), he denied that he himself was Elijah.

The coming of **the Prophet** was predicted by Moses in Deut. 18:15, 18 (God promised to raise up a prophet like Moses to lead God's people.). This figure, a yet-to-come prophet was expected in Jesus' day (John 6:14; 7:40). However, John denied being this Prophet as well (though he was a prophet; see Matthew 11:11–14; John 10:40–41).

v. 23-²³ *He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."*

John 1:23 John describes himself as 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness'. John is declaring that he is the fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah, which stated 'a voice cries out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord,' ... And so this PROPHECY OF ISAIAH PREDICTS that by preaching a word of repentance and divine judgment, this messenger of God was to prepare the way for the Lord ~~God of the OT~~ (~~Yahweh himself~~) to come to God's people through the wilderness.

So what do we have here...

John is the fulfillment of an Old Testament Prophecy, written in the Book of Isaiah... Jesus is defined as 'the light that enlightens everyone'. - - in these texts this morning, we are reading about hope! Christmas, the celebration of Jesus' Birth, or put another way the Celebration of Jesus becoming Immanuel (God with us!!), we are reading that hope is literally coming into the World!!

When I was in High School I played Volleyball back in Pennsylvania. And one of my teammates, and coincidentally one of my best friends, was one of the best volleyball players in the entire state. My friend still holds most of our local high school records for volleyball and even holds a few state records to this day.

Now our team would often travel to tournaments that were several hours away. One of the perks to traveling was we would have the opportunity to play new teams and different opponents that we hadn't seen before, and more to the point they hadn't seen us. Now most places we went were familiar with my friend by name and most were very aware of his talent, but they'd never seen him. They hadn't seen him play, but also they had never seen him physically.

So my coach, always one to exploit an advantage, used this to give our team the upper hand. When we would travel to one of these tournaments, my friend and I would switch warm-up gear and warm-up jerseys to 'trick the other team'. I would warm-up and practice wearing my friend's name and number on my back and he warmed up wearing mine.

Now I don't want to bore you with too much detail entailing strategic talk about volleyball, but I should note that my friend and I played 'opposite' positions from one another, meaning while I warmed-up for

offense he warmed-up for defense and vice versa. Most of the time, the other coaches and teams would spend time watching me warm-up because of the warm-up I was wearing and get a false sense of security regarding the upcoming game because my talent and my friends' talent were incompatible.

I share this story with you because, in a unique way, I was 'preparing the way' for my friend. I was mistaken, intentionally yes, but I was mistaken for someone I was not.

Earlier in the service, our Liturgist read our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 61:1-4.

Isa. 61:1-3 Isaiah in this passage explains the goal of the Messiah's anointing by providing purpose clauses/purpose statements.

- Sent to bring Good News to the oppressed, the poor, the brokenhearted.
- Sent To proclaim liberty.
- To provide spiritual freedom from the oppression of sin
- To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... A new era of blessing

Starting in v. 3, we read a lot about 'They' ('They will be called'; 'They shall build up'; 'They shall raise up'; 'They shall repair') Which begs the Question... **Who is 'they'??**

'They' are The poor/oppressed/the leftout/the forgotten... 'THEY' will become, through the Messiah, creative restorers of the sad situations that humankind has had to live with for so long. Every human ideal will fall into ruins in this world of darkness, but the new culture of life in the city of God, in the presence of God, will thrive forever.

In the Book of Luke, we read that this passage (Isaiah 61) is seen as being fulfilled through Jesus' Ministry. And Isaiah describes these agents of Hope (The poor/oppressed/the leftout/the forgotten), Isaiah describes these Agents of Hope as being changed/empowered/transformed by the coming

Messiah and the Messiah's Message... Put more directly ALL those that are transformed by the Presence of God are called to be Agents of Hope... and will become oaks of righteousness: Grand, fruitful, lasting, and strong.

Jesus' coming, the Story of Christmas, is literally a celebration of Hope entering into the World and requires a realization that through the gift of God, The Gift of God Being: the presence of God's Son (Immanuel/God With US); That through the gift of God everything has changed.

Later in John's Gospel... John writes in Chapter 3:

John 3:27-30 (NRSV)

²⁷ "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

In seminary, my professor and mentor had a picture hanging in his Office... This picture was by the fifteenth century artist Matthias Grunewald who painted a graphic depiction of the Crucifixion of Jesus. In the classic painting, we see several people grieving greatly over the crucifixion. But the right side of the painting is dominated by a somber, though not grieving, John the Baptist. The dominant feature of John the Baptist, is his long, boney, right finger which points to the Crucified Christ.

One day when I was questioning my professor about this painting and its prominent position in his office he said... "*When I lose sight of this purpose/mission, I know I will need to leave ministry*" - we all have this mission!! That we must emphasize Christ's presence and share the hope that Christ offers with others... "He must increase, but I must decrease."

At Advent, God's people summon the courage and spiritual strength to remember that the Holy breaks into the daily... That we can open our Broken Hearts to the Healing Grace, and the Way of Peace that Only God can Offer!

Be Strong my friends, Be Strong my Brothers and Sisters in Christ... For Christmas is coming. Where we will Celebrate that - Christ has come, Hope has entered the World... And the Light WILL overcome the Darkness. Amen!