

Everything Points to the Coming of Christ
Isaiah 11:1-10 & Matthew 3:1-12
Second Sunday in Advent
December 4, 2016

The reporting of news has certainly changed since I was a child. Some of you remember when Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America. If he reported it, you could believe it. There were only a few TV networks with news and there were newspapers – some highly regarded. There were also the news agencies: UPI and the AP. Certainly, our news was filtered, but what came through was, as much as possible, accurate. News still comes from the major networks, but we also get news through blogs, social media, and other sources. A couple of election cycles ago, it became clear that many younger people received their news through the Jon Stewart Show, a comedy series. Now, the latest thing we are hearing about is the phenomenon known as “fake news.” People create dramatically false stories to stir up the populace. People spread these stories without fact checking merely on the basis that they wish it were true – especially if it tears down their political opponents.

Now picture this news story:

Dateline, Jerusalem AD 30. People pour out of Jerusalem to a remote wilderness place along the Jordan to hear a camel-skin wearing, bug and honey eating prophet who appears for all intents and purposes to be insane. After listening to him speak, they allow him to dunk them in the muddy, cold Jordan. It seems to be a type of mass hysteria that has taken hold. So far, thousands have shown up to hear this unbalanced cult leader.

What caused people to appear in the wilderness in droves? Clearly, John was saying something the people wanted to hear. After all, in our day and age, many people won't cross the street to go to a church, but here people went outside of the city walls and out to a fairly remote place. The wilderness was where the wild things were. Unpredictable things happened there. What was John saying that emboldened people to take the risk?

“Repent. Turn around. You've gotten things wrong and turned from God. Reform your lives.” Then, he baptized them, not as we baptize today in the name of the Trinity, but in a ritual washing common to the Jewish people. It was a cleansing, a purification. It was a symbolic washing away of old ways so that people could turn back to God. People were doing this in large numbers and it was a curious thing.

At the same time, the Jewish people were living as an occupied people. The Roman soldiers were never far away. Rome's way of dealing with problems among the people was to squash them like bugs. The Jewish people looked back in their holy writings to find the promise of an anointed king, a warrior leader, a Mashiach/Messiah. This ruler

was to come along and defeat the Romans and take Palestine back to be a strong, independent kingdom. Some Jews prayed for this to happen. Others decided they could not wait for it to happen in God's time. There were several subversive parties, among them, the Zealots. This group carried daggers under their robes and would stab their opponents to death in a crowded city square and then disappear undetected into the crowd. It's shocking that such a thing could happen in the Middle East, isn't it?

The truth of the matter was that everyone desired major systemic change. Some sought it by following the teachings of John who said that change begins within ourselves. Repent. Turn back to God. Others sought change through revolution. The revolutionaries had a tough row to hoe because the Romans were so good at putting down rebellion. It was into this world that John and Jesus entered ministry.

In hindsight, how disappointed the people must have been. They expected a warrior to enter the city with his armies and might. What they got was a baby in a manger. And worse, that baby was born to poor people: a carpenter from a less-than-notable town and his betrothed wife, a teen mother. What could possibly come of this?

Some people thought John was the One. After all, he seemed just crazy enough that perhaps the Romans wouldn't notice as he amassed an army to take the land back. He assured them that there was One to come who would truly bring the kingdom of God near. John talked about turning to God, but when he baptized Jesus, he let the people in on the secret that before them stood the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world.

People thought something new was happening here, but we, from our side of the resurrection, know that John's and Jesus' message was really nothing new. It had all appeared in the holy writings. "A voice cries in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" John was that voice, but those words go back to the Babylonian exile and on of the writers of Isaiah. Jesus talks about a kingdom – not the kingdom of the Romans, but the kingdom or reign of God.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

This, my friends, is a description of the kingdom of God. It is the redeemed world, once all that we have broken has been set right. Everything points to the coming of Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One, the Mashiach, the Messiah.

I want to go back to John, though. He is our central Gospel character this week. Why is he so important? Why is he needed to prepare the way? What does he say to us as the church of the 21st century?

John had something to say that the people wanted to hear. He had something to say that the people *needed*, to hear. The history of the Chosen People is one in which they were faithful for a time and then they were not. It was like a swinging pendulum. Their faithlessness was not a result of them being bad people. They behaved in faithless ways because they lost sight of their priorities. They made new priorities that were all about them. They circled the wagons. Every time they did not take care of “the other,” they got into trouble. They were told by the prophets to care for children and widows. In our society, women and children are the most likely to live in poverty. They were told to care for the aliens living in their lands. There are so many people of other cultures and languages living in our midst – some documented, some not. Not every immigrant speaks Spanish. On Thursday, I was at the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee annual luncheon, and I ran into a Turkish Muslim man I met through my last church when we were studying Islam. He is the president of the Niagara Foundation, which exists to bring understanding between Muslims and other religious communities. He also works at the Medical College of Wisconsin. We need to not only treat “the other” well, but we need to get to know them. Troy Perry, the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church said, “To know us is to love us.” Muslims are “those people” until we have several Muslim friends. Undocumented Mexican workers are “those people” until we get to know them.

But I digress. I love that line of Sophia’s from *The Golden Girls*. I always wanted to use it in a sermon and now I have. But I digress. We are the church, the body of Christ in the world. How will we, like John, have a word that people not only need to hear, but one which causes them to come to a wilderness place, a foreign place, a church to hear? How will we go into the community as Jesus went from place to place and truly “make the world our parish?”

I’ve said some edgy things here. We live with many fears. The media and our political leadership like when we are afraid. That is not a place in which I am willing to live. The question I must ask myself, and I hope you will ask yourself, is, “What must I turn from in order to turn to God?” John said, “Repent. Turn.” The prophets in the Hebrew scriptures told the people the same thing.

“The Word was made flesh and lived among us.” We carry that message and that light. Tosa Avenue United Methodist Church has been a light. We live in a swiftly changing world. You and I, as the church, the body of Christ, are needed. If any of my edgy words offended you, I have two things to say. I’m sorry, and get over it. We don’t have time to argue. Like John, we have to get out in the highways and byways to say, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Everything points to the coming of Christ.