

**Readings:**

*Malachi 3:1-4*

*Luke 1:68-79 (in place of psalm)*

*Philippians 1:3-11*

*Luke 3:1-6*

**Sermon December 9<sup>th</sup> 2018***God's Love is Steeped with Forgiveness*

John's arrival in the wilderness couldn't come at a better time for God's people. They have been living under Roman rule for quite some time. Suffering much oppression as the Emperor over taxed many of them into poverty.

Within the last couple of decades or so Rome has decided to take control of who is appointed head of the high priests in Jerusalem. Killing off any who show dissent against the Empire.

And if this isn't enough. Many of God's people are carrying heavy loads of guilt in their hearts as their theology teaches them that if they are struggling in this life they or a previous relative must have done something sinful to lead to their fate. These thoughts were even more prominent in the wilderness where many widows, orphans, people with illnesses and disabilities were exiled to, because they were perceived as sinful or unclean.

So, John comes to the wilderness to meet all these people who are living in oppression. Whose hearts are steeped with guilt and feelings of inadequacy. People who need to hear a different message from the one they are used to hearing. A message that hopefully frees them from the guilt that keeps holding them back from being the people God created them to be.

How many of us here sometimes feel like our hearts are steeped with guilt? Steeped with feelings of being inadequate?

Maybe there are people in your life like a parent or a spouse or a relative or a close friend or a teacher or a boss who are so critical of everything you say and do that you start to get down on yourself. You feel inadequate. Thinking you can't do anything right. You long to hear a different message from this person or people.

Some one that I know really well has these two friends that are just so mean. When I sit and hear how they talk to her I can't believe she hangs out with them. Every minute they seem to be putting her down about something. I remember seeing her mother do the same thing to her most of her life. Sometimes her son and daughter put her down as well. I have seen how badly this has impacted her life. She feels so inadequate

walking around with all this guilt inside her all the time. It seems like she is in a constant state of depression. Like God's people, she is longing to hear a different message.

Being an Oilers fan, I have failed many times to reflect God's love when watching games. I get so critical of every mistake they make. I find myself putting them down all the time. Sadly, I am not the only fan that does this. It is becoming more acceptable to go to a game and boo your team when they are struggling. Or mock the opponent's goalie or your own goalie when he lets in a soft goal.

Then we wonder why they struggle so much with their mental game when instead of being supportive we focus on their struggles. We pour on the negative talk when they already are having trouble believing in themselves. I wouldn't be surprised if the Oilers are longing to hear a different message from their fans.

Now being Flames fans you may struggle to sympathize with Oiler fans or the Oilers for that matter. But, no matter what team you cheer for you probably can relate to being that negative fan at times. Focusing on the mistakes instead of the positives. Knowing deep down inside that like yourself, those players sometimes long to hear a different message from us.

Living in a world where people's expectations are so high we probably all walk around with guilt and feelings of inadequacy from time to time. We all have stood with God's people longing to hear a different message.

During the month of December our broken relationships. Our failures. Our grief. Our inadequacies are magnified as we reflect on a season that comes with way too many expectations. Messages that say we and our loved ones need the perfect present to be happy even if we don't have enough money to afford that present. Messages that say we need to be close to our families even if they treat us poorly. Messages that say we need to be joyous and happy even if we are struggling with depression, loneliness, or grief. Messages that say we need to travel near and far to be with loved ones even when our highways are hit with snow storms. Even when all three kids have been screaming at each other for the last three hours in the back seat of the van. Sometimes we come away from Christmas feeling the total opposite to what the gospel preaches. We feel guilty and inadequate. Exhausted and hurt. Instead, of hopeful. Forgiven. Empowered.

Well, John delivers his message. And at it's core is not a God who is criticizing us. But a God who forgives us. Who empowers us. Who restores us. Who breathes new life into us. John is preparing the way for Jesus by proclaiming a message that Jesus will

spend the next three years of his life preaching to the masses all over the countryside and even into Jerusalem. Come and receive God's forgiveness. Repent and be free to live the life God has in store for you.

So, people come from all over to receive this forgiveness. To hear a message that isn't oppressive or judgmental. But, a message of hope. A message that promotes forgiveness, justice, redemption.

A message that talks about a savior who is going to not only restore individual lives but all of creation. A savior who comes into the world not to condemn the world, but to save it.

This is the message we come to church to hear during Advent, Christmas, and all year long. A message of Jesus the Messiah who will be born in a manger bringing God's forgiveness and love to all of creation. Even to poor shepherds. Even to exiled people in the wilderness. Even to you and I. This is a message that liberates us from our guilt and frees us to live the life God has in store for us. A life that reflects God's love, forgiveness, and restoration to the people and societies we encounter and live in.

**Let us pray**, loving God, thank you for forgiving us. For liberating us from our guilt. For empowering us to love others in the same way you love us. In Jesus name we pray,  
**Amen.**