

Second Sunday in Advent

Luke 3:1-9

As we again look forward to celebrate the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, you may ask anyone in the New Testament how to get there and they all will say the same thing: you first go out into the wilderness, keep on going until you get to the River Jordan.

You will see a man out there standing in the water, baptizing people.

That's John the Baptist.

If you want to go to Bethlehem, you start there.

They all say the same thing – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – all four gospels.

They all say if you want to go to Bethlehem, see what happened there, understand what it means, then go to see John.

If you go to the Bible to find out what Christmas means, you will run into John.

You just can't get away from him. Ask John.

Ask him how to get to Bethlehem.

That's what he is out there for.

I don't know about you, but I don't really want to ask him.

I don't want to ask him, because I know what John is going to say to me.

You see, John is a prophet.

And somehow we got the wrong idea that prophets are concerned only with the future.

We often use this word that way.

We think a prophet is someone who predicts what is going to happen in the future, and that's only partly right.

What is hard to take about prophets is what they say about our present life.

They say things like, "Why don't you practice what you preach?"

Why don't you walk the talk?"

Prophets remind us of what we know and don't want to be reminded of.

They never seem to say the right things.

The right thing is what the right people want to hear.

Prophets seem to go to the right people saying the wrong things, saying what the right people do not want to hear.

They all did that: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Malachi, all of them.

All of the biblical prophets did that.

And they all paid the consequences for doing it.

John the Baptist is no exception.

One day he goes to King Herod.

Herod felt himself to be liberated from the morality that other people have to live by; he thought he was above the law.

Herod is corrupt, guilty of murder, incest and who knows what else.

At the time he is married to his niece who was also his sister-in-law.

Now John knew from scripture that morality is serious business; and what is more, that it affects those around us.

John knew nothing about this “what I do is my own business as long as it does not hurt anybody else” kind of morality.

He knew that scripture teaches us that everything you and I do either hurts or helps someone else.

So he went to Herod and told him,

“You are an embarrassment to the nation and an insult to God.”

And Herod said to John, “You are under arrest” and he locked him up till one night his stepdaughter said she wanted John’s head on a platter – and she got it; they just cut off his head.

In order to understand the gospel for today better, let us use our imagination and invite John the Baptist to come to our service this morning, whether we like it or not, and ask him a few questions.

“John, how come you keep talking about repentance at Christmas time, and why are you so rude, even calling people brood of vipers?

Can you not get into the spirit of the season?

No wonder you are not on any Christmas card.

This is a happy season and not a gloomy time.”

And John says, “Christmas is more than jingle bells and tinsel, Santa Claus and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

Christmas is not a fairy tale. It is not make-belief.
The promised Messiah was born at Christmas.
That means a beachhead was established in this world,
eternity has broken into time, and the kingdom of God is now here!
You want to go to Bethlehem?
Well, maybe you do not really understand what happened there.
I will admit, it was not as I expected either.
I expected the Messiah to come in glory and power with a sword
to separate the righteous from sinners, but that did not happen.
Instead he came as a helpless baby born in a stable in Bethlehem.
He did not come in force to defeat the kingdom of Herod,
but he came in love to win the hearts of people.
So what you are faced with today is what people have faced
ever since I came out here into the wilderness preaching.
You too are faced with a choice: Which king are you going to
give your loyalty to, the king of power or the king of love?”
Then John asks us, “Why are you going to Bethlehem?
Are you going there to get Jesus to bless your world the way it is,
or are you going to Bethlehem to let him change you so you can change
the world around you?”

You see, that is why we did not want to see John.
We knew what he was going to say and we did not want to hear it.
If we are going to survive, if we are going to make it in this world,
then we have to be realistic. We have to use our common sense.
Yes, Herod may be wrong, but Herod rules, not Jesus; power not love.
But John the Baptist will not let us get away with that.
He says that the kingdom of God is here; Jesus brought it.
Not as he expected, but it is here. He is the Messiah!
So the kingdom of God is here and you know it is here, John says.
The problem is if it is here, the only way you are going to know for sure
is to prepare your hearts for his advent, his coming.
And with that he cries again “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance
for the kingdom of God is here!”

Yes, John is here to remind us that Advent is a time of repentance. He is here to remind us that the proper preparation for Christmas is doing what Jesus taught:

If we are alienated from someone today, this is the time of reconciliation.

If we have been self-righteous or judgmental, now is the time for us to be understanding of other people.

If we have been self-centered, now is the time for us to get some feeling in our life for someone or something other than just ourselves.

If we have assumed that power and manipulation are the only way to solve the problems of this world, now is the time to try something else.

If we have put our trust in material things, now is the time for us to put our trust in God.

John the Baptist calls us to a new beginning in the kingdom of God as he proclaims repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance is one of the most beautiful words in our language.

It pays us the highest compliment for it says that we can actually do something about the path we have taken.

We can repent and start over, we can begin again.

I would hate to live in a world where there is no chance to repent.

Every life accumulates a certain amount of garbage.

No matter how earnestly and carefully we live we all make mistakes, we all sin.

In time, our sins, our mistakes and poor choices pile up and can become like a mountain pressing down on us and suffocating us, until we spend endless hours day and night haunted by regrets and guilt.

In psalm 32 David shows us that unacknowledged sin can destroy us.

It can eat us up from within.

It has a way of consuming us.

This psalm is a testimony of David's battle with guilt: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning day and night."

Unacknowledged sin can be physically and psychologically devastating.

But repentance is a precious, life-giving gift from
God.

The

prison of sin cannot withstand the power of confession.

A full confession brings freedom, relief and healing.

Repentance is a wholesome way to look the past in the eye,
confess it for what it is, then leave it behind, and go on to a new start.

Repentance is the door by which our Lord comes into our lives
and with him mercy, grace, peace and wholeness.

As we repent, we sweep out the accumulated garbage of our lives and,
like John, prepare the way for the Lord to come to us.

Psalm 32 is a grateful testimony of joy for God' s gift of forgiveness
toward those who with integrity confess their sins and are receptive to
God' s rule in their lives.

There is hope for us.

We can get rid of the garbage of life, our past, our failures, our sins,
our regrets, and our guilt.

Thanks be to God, for he is a forgiving God, gracious and
compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in unfailing love
(Nehemiah 9:17).

Amen.

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