

Second Sunday in Advent – December 9, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Luke 3:15-20 (NIV)

John the Baptist

“Prepare the Way”

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16) 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.

17) 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." 18) And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

19) But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20) Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

I hope you will pardon my clothing, but this is what I always wear. The only thing I own is this camel's hair tunic and the belt around my waist. It's not my intention to draw attention to my dress – nor to myself, for that matter. I was called to be just a Voice – a voice crying in the wilderness: "***Prepare the Way for the Lord.***"

I am just a man named John, a man sent from God. I was not the Light that was coming into the world. I was called to bear witness to the Light. You know me best as John the Baptist.

My father, Zechariah, was a priest. I remember as a boy hearing him tell the story of how I was an answer to prayer. He told me about the angel Gabriel who appeared to him in the Temple to tell him that God had special plans for him and my mother. In their old age they would be given a son – and their son would someday play a pivotal role in the coming of the promised Messiah. I didn't understand all of it, but from little on I had a sense that I was a child of destiny. My father showed me the prophecy of Malachi about Elijah being sent before the day of the Lord – and he told me that the angel said I would go before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah. I was to be the bridge between the old and the new, the herald of the new age. The time of the Messiah and his Kingdom was at hand.

I grew up and lived in a treacherous time. The world then, as now, was evil. There had been no prophets of the Lord in our land for over 400 years. If you've read anything about the times between the New and Old Testaments, you know about the troubles we Jews experienced. Our country was often dominated by other nations. In my day, the hated Romans occupied our homeland. There was a succession of cruel and treacherous Herods on the throne. They ruled, as did the High Priests in the temple, by permission and appointment of Rome – and usually they obtained their positions as a result of paying money into the hands of influential Romans. Religion and politics were mingled in a most ungodly way.

As I grew to manhood I kept thinking about my father's words, and especially about what the angel told him. I experienced a growing awareness that God was leading me to sound the alarm and get people ready for the coming Savior.

At thirty years of age, when our Jewish society allowed men to begin to comment on the Scriptures read in the synagogues instead of just listening respectfully to their elders, I moved out into the ministry for which I had been born, the ministry for which the Spirit had filled me and shaped me.

I went into the desert area – hot, rough country – to begin my ministry. I must have been quite a sight – never having shaved or cut my hair, my skin darkened by the desert sun, wearing this rustic clothing. And my strong voice had been well graveled by the desert winds.

I knew only that the King was coming, and that I was to prepare the way for him. It was time for God to assert his eternal rule in the hearts and lives of his people – and I knew that people would first have to be prepared. Something would have to turn them around. That was my job – to get them turned around and ready for the King.

There's no way I could have anticipated the crowds that I attracted. I didn't go to them in their cities and villages; they came out to me – hundreds of them, thousands of them. Only the Spirit of the Lord could have produced these results. I became more convinced than ever – this was it! He was coming! The Great One, the Promised King was coming to establish his Kingdom – the Mighty One, whose sandals I was unworthy to untie. ***"People of Judah!"*** I cried out. ***"Turn your lives around! Repent and believe! The Kingdom is at hand! Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance!"***

My message never varied – not for anyone. I spoke straight from the hip and my words went straight to the heart. When Pharisees and other religious leaders joined the parade to be baptized by me in the Jordan River, I called them a bunch of snakes, warning them to examine their motives as well as their lives. I warned that the Lord had his ax in his hand, and any tree not bringing forth fruit would be cut down and cast into the fire – and I told them that the ax was already being laid to the roots of the tree.

When people asked me what they should do to be ready, I said, ***"Straighten up your act! Quit cheating. Stop being greedy and be generous in your sharing and giving. Repent and believe – for the Kingdom is near at hand!"***

After I had been preaching like this for a while I became aware of a problem. Everyone kept asking me about **me**. Who was I? I was always afraid that they were making so much of me that they might miss my message – so I kept my testimony clear: ***"I am not the Christ. I am not the Messiah. I'm just a voice, just a herald in the wilderness, crying, 'Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!'"***

Then one day, while I was preaching and baptizing, I saw him. I saw him – but not as my cousin, but as my Savior. It all came together in a moment of inspiration: He was the ONE – the Messiah, the Fulfiller of the covenant, the King of heaven and earth. I pointed to him, and the Spirit put new words on my lips: ***"Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*** I wanted him to baptize me, but he insisted that he take his place alongside the others. He said that in this way he would ***"fulfill all righteousness."***

When I baptized Jesus I saw the heavens open above him. I saw the Spirit of God descend on him in the form of a dove. I heard the Voice of God saying, ***"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."*** I saw and heard it all – and I testified that this Jesus of Nazareth is the very Son of God.

And that's it. He began his saving ministry, and I faded off the screen. My job was done, my mission accomplished. The King was here. So I began to decrease – and Jesus began to increase. That was God's will and plan for me and for him.

It wasn't long after that I found myself in Herod's prison. You see, I had publicly condemned Herod for his adultery. So he had me arrested, and thrown into one of his dungeons. Those were dark days. It wasn't easy for me, an outdoors-man, to be caged like an animal. I came close to losing my faith. I was separated from the world and the people once again – but that didn't bother me so much as seeing that my expectations of the Messiah and his Kingdom weren't being met. I had proclaimed him to be a Man of decisive, divine judgment – but he seemed to be ready to accept any and every kind of person. There in my cell I began to wonder: "What's happening out there? Where are his soldiers and servants? Where are the trumpets? Where is this righteous Kingdom of God that I've been proclaiming?"

Finally, I sent two of my disciples to investigate, to ask Jesus some questions. They came back with a whole new insight into the Program of the Christ – God's plan for our salvation. Jesus told them to tell me, ***"The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the poor have the Gospel preached to them – and blessed is he who does not fall away on account of me."***

I couldn't have been more shocked or more thrilled. How slow of me. How dumb. I knew immediately that Jesus was referring to Isaiah's description of the Messiah and his Kingdom. He had not come on a royal chariot, not with soldiers and marching bands, not with pomp and circumstance, glory and power. He had come as the Servant of the Lord, the meek, humble Suffering Servant that Isaiah had foretold. He had not come to set up a worldly kingdom, not even an earthly Kingdom of Israel. He had come to establish the Kingdom of God. He would call and gather into his Kingdom the poor and needy -- all who would humbly receive him in faith.

I remembered Isaiah's ***"led like a lamb to the slaughter"*** and I understood why the Holy Spirit led me to call him the ***"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."*** I should have known all along. It was right there in the sacred scrolls. I recalled Isaiah's words: ***"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried out sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. With his stripes we are healed"*** – and I knew that in the end Jesus would do for us what we could never do for ourselves. He would offer himself as God's Lamb, the perfect sacrifice. He would suffer our punishment, die in atonement for our sins, and restore us to life eternal.

I remembered my father's telling me of his Spirit-filled reaction when I was born to be the King's herald. He said he had praised God: ***"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people."*** I remembered, and I believed. And I was content, even in prison.

It was Herod's wife who finally did me in. In a moment of jealous rage at one of his wild parties, I became the focus of her hateful attention. She was responsible for having my head chopped off and presented to her on a platter. But it didn't matter. My work was done; my life was complete.

I understand that my voice is still the Advent Voice in Christian Churches. The message certainly has to be the same for every generation. Before Christmas comes, listen to me. If you want Christmas to really bless you, then ***"Repent! For the Kingdom is at hand! The King is coming! Prepare your hearts for him! Receive him again in faith! Turn your life around and serve him in love!"***

Our Lord Jesus honored me by saying, ***"Among those born of woman there is no one greater than John."*** But you who live today have a definite advantage over me. That's why Jesus continued: ***"Yet the one who is least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John."*** Both you and I are in the Kingdom by God's grace alone – but you have a better understanding than I did of the Good News, because you have what you call the New Testament. What I struggled to understand about Jesus you see clearly through the Gospel accounts of his death – and more than that, you know that he rose in victory to assure you of eternal life.

I was the last of the prophets – and I had to "stand on tiptoe," as it were, to see the redemption in Christ. You, however, have 2,000 years of Christianity on which to build. You have prophecy and fulfillment. You have received grace upon grace.

I must go now. Listen, and you will hear the echo of my voice, the message still the same for you and yours – just as urgent and just as glorious. "***Repent and believe! The Kingdom of God is here! The Kingdom of God is yours!***"

AMEN.