

Sermon Advent III Year B 2017

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 17, 2017

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This Advent, I seem to have been consumed by the word “prepare.” So much so that I can feel stuck on this word. Everything seems to be about preparation. I have been thankful for the AdventWord reflections from VTS that offer me some other words and images to reflect upon. They refocus my attention in another direction, away from planning and preparation. As I have said before, always looking ahead can mean we miss the present.

Only for children does Advent seem to be a slow journey. Time is growing short. Anticipation is building as we reach the third week of Advent. Only one week to go until we arrive at the Feast of the Incarnation, the celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. This year is unique in that the 4th Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve combine. What an interesting day we will have next Sunday.

To further stoke the flames of anticipation and excitement we once again hear from the prophet, John. Last Sunday, we heard the gospel writer Mark’s story of John the Baptist. This Sunday we are still hearing of John but today from the gospel of John.

“There was a man who was sent by God whose name was John.” John came as a witness, a witness to the light that was coming into the world. His task was to enable others to see the light. To witness to Jesus, the “true light,” the divine Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us. We heard that John’s mission was quite effective. “People from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.” Surely some of this description is meant to be hyperbole. We aren’t to believe that all the streets of Jerusalem were deserted as people went to the Jordan River to hear John.

Yet, his movement was a powerful event in Judea that caused quite a stir. People came from all over confessing their sins and being baptized in the Jordan River. Such was the authenticity of John. Authentic lives attract and such was the case with John. John attracted not only the crowds whom he baptized but others joined his mission as well. He attracted disciples who followed him and aided his work. There was quite a movement surrounding him.

Successful religious movements inevitably attract the attention of those in authority as well. The religious authorities in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to investigate what was taking place. They wondered, just what was the story of this evangelist called John who was attracting such a following?

John in his rather straightforward manner addressed those who were sent to question his identity. In response to “Who are you?” John answers first who he is not. He does not want to fan the flames of speculation. He responds with three “I am not” statements. He was not the Messiah. Well then others speculated that he was the much awaited return of the prophet Elijah. Again, John responds, “I am not.” Well, then if not the Messiah and not Elijah, then certainly John is a prophet. Wrong again as John replies, “I am not.”

John is very clear about who he is. He is clear that he is a messenger, sent to proclaim and announce the coming of someone greater than himself.

Equally important, John is clear about whose he is. John knows that he is not a free agent. John has been called by God and sent as a witness. He is a witness to the light that was coming into the world. His mission was to point the way to another. “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Isn't that also what we are called to do? As followers of Jesus aren't we preparing the way of the Lord in our day? Aren't we making the path straight so that people can discover Jesus?

In the midst of our world so broken by the sin associated with abuses of power, including terror, war, racism, and sexual assault. But the brokenness doesn't stop there, our environment is in distress as well as manifested by fires, hurricanes, earthquakes and more. These are pretty bleak times for many. And while we have much that we are preparing for, each of us has been named by God and sent here on a mission.

To do this work effectively, like John the Baptist, we must be clear about who we are, and most importantly whose we are. We are beloved children of God, created in God's image. You and I have been sent by God into the world and named, just as John had been. We must know ourselves to be disciples of Jesus if we are to do the work that we are called to do. Our task is always to point the way to Jesus.

You see, like John, each of us has been sent as well. You can hear the opening sentence of our gospel lesson as a particular invitation to you. "There was a woman who was sent by God and her name was..." (repeat with child, etc.) That is God's perspective you see. We are a people who are sent into the world with a message and a way of life. We have a divine secret to reveal. Unlike the message promulgated by many, that life is of little value, full of suffering and then you die. We believe something entirely different. We believe we are capable of revealing the divine image, of telling the divine story and offering redemption, forgiveness, and love. And that this divine love is drawing us to God's self.

In our day many do not know Jesus present in their midst. They hunger for relationship, for the witness of authentic lives. They long to know Jesus Christ. As the BCP expresses our call, we are "to know Christ and to make Christ known." We teach Jesus. We teach the love of Jesus to children and adults who do not yet know the good news.

We do this in our particular settings, our home, our neighborhood, our workplace or school and in this church. We are to bring good news to those who are oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted; proclaim liberty to those who are bound; comfort those who mourn, and work for peace that everyone may lead a

life of abundance. To prepare the way of Jesus is to bear witness to him in word and deed.

Christian witness is faith lived out in action. Reaching out to others, extending ourselves as the hands and feet of Christ. We do that when we welcome guests and strangers. We do that when we visit the sick and shut in, whether they are our neighbors next door, or residing at any of the many facilities providing ongoing care for those in need.

We do that with our gifts of time, talent, and treasure. At this time of year we do it through the ministry of angel trees with our gifts for children of Tinbridge Hill or the Monacan nation. Or providing food to those in need through Meals on Wheels or the Thanksgiving dinner at the Yoder Center, or the Advent breakfast and wreath making by our youth or tomorrow's Christmas Dinner at Miriam's House, or our support of the RAEFP. Or in ringing the bell supporting the Salvation Army and so many other endeavors. These are all ways that we show Christ to the world.

In John's day, Jesus was already in their midst yet they did not perceive him. Jesus is in our midst as well and people today also need help seeing him. Jesus said, "In as much as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." The rescue mission of God is underway. God is offering good news to the oppressed and announcing liberty to the captives. This is the time of the Lord's favor. Jesus is with us and working through us. We are Christ's hands and feet in the world.

Our task is to prepare the way of the Lord. To bear witness to our Lord and Savior so that everyone may know of God's love and Christ's saving work. Advent calls us to prepare for the in-breaking reign of God. For the celebration of the birth of the Christ child. God breaking into history in human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in order to reveal the depth of divine love for the world. Knowing this is truly a source of joy and delight. No wonder we lit the candle of joy on our Advent wreath today.