

SUNDAY, JANUARY 10, 2021 SERMON

Now 11-29 seems so long ago, but on our 1st Sunday in Advent-we spoke on Luke 1:17 about how God entered INTO human's picture after 400 long years of silence- God did this by sending his angel to tell Zechariah that his elderly wife Eliz. and he would have a son and that son must be named John for he was to prepare the way for the coming Lord.

We reflected on this as a way to help US prepare for Jesus' coming –noting our need to remove the obstacles that stand between us and a close relationship with God. Why do we need to do this? So we could sing the beloved Christmas hymn= *Joy to the World* –with real JOY -able to do what the hymn suggests-prepare him room.

And maybe you're asking- Prepare him room for what? As believers we're to make room so we can receive him fully as our Lord. And when we do- HIS light will shine not only in OUR darkness enflaming hope, peace, joy and love, but HIS light in us can be shared with those around us –helping whoever is sitting IN darkness to see a flicker of hope which is able to ignite ALL Jesus offers them as well.

And it's here in Mark 1:1-11 that we catch sight of the magnitude in what Jesus is able to offer. Although Mark's gospel is the shortest-it has the greatest sense of urgency-for the word ""immediately"" is used 41 times in Mark. We just finished celebrating the Christmas season and find ourselves hurled immediately into this urgent and profound scenario that now focuses the babies who in the blink of an eye are now adults with a purpose.

It demonstrates Mark's push-to get to it- which we sometimes need, don't we? We know that this John who came to baptize- is Zech and Eliz son. The one we spoke of at the beginning of the message and although the angel tells Zech that John will be the preparer the way, God had been planning to send the Messiah's preparer centuries before and Mark brings that prophesy from 700BC to mind with words from Isaiah.

When Isaiah first spoke these words to God's people, it was during a very difficult time in their history. With no land, no government, and no temple to call their own, it was hard for God's people to believe that God was on their side.

But God disclosed promises to Isaiah that Isaiah then shared—promises about deliverance and about God's presence. As he shared God's promises, Isaiah prophesied about another "voice" that would be shouting in the wilderness. And this "voice" WAS John's voice, the one whom God had chosen to prepare the world for Jesus and WHAT he would teach God's people.

But BEFORE the people could listen and understand Jesus' teaching, they needed to be prepared to RECEIVE it. And the way John prepared them was by preaching noisily of their need to repent of sinful ways so they could make room in their hearts and minds to receive Jesus in.

This made sin MORE than a sense of guilt or feeling sorry for doing wrong-he stressed our NEED to take ownership of our sin and then having a deep desire to CHANGE so we would WANT to step away from a sinful pattern or behavior.

The day finally came for Jesus to make his first public appearance and John welcomed him to the waters of the Jordan River. John clearly knew his role and John's life stands as an example to US of what it takes to shake a nation that doesn't really want to hear that they need to get rid of any obstacles within by repenting, turning away from sin, living a life grateful of the forgiveness that would be offered to them.

Our nation needs shaking B/C it's evident that people haven't gotten rid of the boulders within to make room for God. And this is where WE come in, B/C like John; we've been entrusted with the task of not only preparing men and women to see and receive Jesus, but to help them listen to him, so they have a chance to understand that God IS gracious, compassionate, forgiving and loving and that WE need to be too.

But in order to know what we should do to make this happen, perhaps we need to look at what John shows us first –B/C what he shows us is significant. We're to prepare the Messiah's way by being a living parable of commitment to Christ. Crying out that B/C HE IS in the world- he still has a relevant message and lesson for us.

His message helps us realize that THIS IS HIS Kingdom, that there is danger in sin B/C it separates people from their TRUE King, and the hope of forgiveness to those who turn to the King in repentance-WILL BE a transforming experience NOT ONLY for the individual but society.

This is a strong challenge and a serious message. But what we also see is that this was more than just an announcement- John's preparation would include a call to action that challenges us and those we speak with to look inward with different eyes and then more importantly to look Godward.

Another lesson that John teaches us is our need to be CAREFUL to not ALLOW ourselves to become distracted-losing sight of the real focus of our life of faith. John was able to maintain his focus B/C he had a clear SENSE of purpose. So much so that it showed amazing results. But the lesson also IS that he lived out his purpose with Boldness.

John was fearless in his purpose. Even during hardship his focus NEVER dimmed and he didn't allow opposition to throw him off track either. This is the same attitude and courage we need so we DON'T blend into society but instead stand out as being different.

And we are different or should be- B/C we're offering a different way to live- a hopeful way to live that leads to peace, Joy & the ability to love as God loves.

We have entered into a new year- and although many looked forward to 2020 ending - we know that the issues that made 2020 almost unbearable didn't go away when the clock struck 12:00. We still have the same crises and in fact after 1/6's national storm, we have more to add to the list.

However, there IS hope. And we CAN have hope today by looking back at what happened in 2020. When we do -we will see clearly not only our need for God to be with us- but that God WAS and IS with us! And in taking what we saw and what we know to heart -we can feel God's presence - assured that God IS in control.

When we KNOW this deep down- we can tell people where their hope can really come from and how they can live hopeful, grateful, and peaceful lives-learning HOW to love, respect and be kind to each other.

And I'm sure that some are agreeing that this is esp. needed for those who rioted at the capital, for those who shoot innocent black people, for those who are destroying God's earth, for "those" & I agree.

But I also believe our call is to help people and esp. Christians who have become complaisant and comfortable- to help open their eyes and their mouths and go OUT their doors to share the gospel of Christ with people so that our nation CAN wake up and be transformed by hearing, seeing, and then living Christian principles.

Will this be easy? Heck no! The wilderness has become grossly overgrown, the highways are beyond crooked, the valleys are dark and deep, egos are the size of mountains-all of which is making our road rough going, but this didn't stop John and it SHOULDN'T stop us.

B/C God still desires us to be willing followers, quick to humble ourselves to say yes and in saying yes-ready to go and do= and in going –we’re to EXPECT & watch in awe as God frees us from barriers that destroy our confidence and ability to serve him-to see the CREATIVITY that God gives us to accomplish OUR purpose-

Then to watch in amazement as God opens doors for us to go through so that humankind HAS the opportunity to see IN us and hear from us about God’s love, forgiveness and salvation and what it REALLY means for them.

In Proverbs 1- it says that the wisdom IN God’s inspired Word WILL teach us how to be wise and self-controlled- it WILL teach us to do what is honest, fair, and right in God’s eyes. That when wise people listen and learn they will understand these wise words, stories, and riddles.

But this proverb goes on to let us know that God’s wisdom isn’t always easy to hear B/C God’s wisdom is being said in the midst of the noise of chaos in the midst of a society TRYING to distract us-trying to make us hide in FEAR.

Again, I agree that WHAT is happening in our nation is upsetting-and not knowing what will happen tomorrow causes fear and trepidation, but as Sally wrote to the consistory-we’ve been through this before.

Who remembers the war in Korea, Vietnam and its aftermath, the Bay of pigs, the constant threat of nuclear war with Russia, air raid drills, violent civil rights marches, MLK, Jr. assassination & the aftermath, riots in Compton and LA in 92- 9/11- the wars in the middle East-COVID=just to name a few.

Was God in our midst- YES. Did we get through it- YES. Did we see barriers removed that had been erected to destroy our ability to serve God- I would say YES. Did we see doors open to share the gospel- again YES. Did many go through those doors to help people understand that what Jesus taught WAS important in God’s eyes and important to living together in society?- I would have to say-by the looks of things-NO not enough did.

And we could END this message here by blaming Christians from the past in NOT preparing the way for Christ to be received more fully, we could blame government officials now and in the past, there are MANY we could point fingers at OR.....

WAIT! Who’s that? Here comes wisdom now-Jesus is emerging from the water. Will we take THIS opportunity beginning today- to COMMIT to walk WITH him? If you answer YES- as we walk, will we listen; really LISTEN to his teachings SO THAT WE can feel confident EVEN in the storms –

SO confident- that WE’RE able to be BOLD to fulfill OUR purpose in preparing HIS way today SO THAT perhaps one day ALL our human made storms can finally diminish. THEN the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people WILL see it together. Do WE hear the Lord speaking? Amen