

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11
John 1: 6-8, 19-23
December 11, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent

To the extent that anyone identifies with the sacred story that weaves through the season of Advent, we tend to think about Mary and Joseph and the birth of Jesus. Or, perhaps if we are adventurous we might think about the Roman Emperor far away whose whim caused people to leave their homes and register in far away towns. We might inquire about the shepherds to whom the angels appeared, the wise men who followed a star and the Roman puppet king who feared for his power and sought the death of the baby to be born.

Yet this morning we are presented with the mysterious figure of John the Baptist, a man who exists at the ragged margin of the story; a man we think of as a wild looking intimidating figure who lives in self imposed exile from the civilized world. He lives in the wilderness of the land—that trackless arid and rocky area where what life there is hangs on, fragile and helpless.

In fact John is an import into the Christmas story. His only appearance in the linear order of events occurs when he leaps in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth when her cousin Mary comes to visit. The baby John is so in tune with what God is doing that he knows that the baby in Mary's womb is the messiah. The he disappears from the scene until the time comes for him to announce that this messiah is appearing for the entire world to see in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

But for us who gather in this season of Advent the sacred story is not a self contained recitation of events that we repeat every year and then move on. Advent is a rich tapestry composed of the *entire* biblical story. To enter into this time of preparation for the birth of Jesus

is to become mindful of the timeless world of sacred memory where as the poet T.S. Eliot observed, each moment of time contains the whole of time—present, past *and* future.

So with us today is God who created the heavens and the earth. Present are Adam and Eve whose tragic choices in the garden destroyed shalom-- the harmony of all living things in relation to the Creator and to one another. Present are Sarah and Abraham who by faith believed that they would become parents of a people. Present are the Israelites who groaned in the oppression of slavery and who were led by Moses to the land of promise, receiving the covenant of the Law which transformed them from a scattered group of clans into a people of God. Present are Ruth and Boaz who gave birth to Obed the father of Jesse the father of the future King David from whose line the messiah was to come. Present are the prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah—whose words called attention to the coming messiah and foreshadowed not just the birth of Jesus, but also his mission which we heard about in our first reading, and his death.

And also present are all the figures who live beyond the birth of the son of Mary and Joseph and all the events of his ministry. As we gather at the stable we are also mindful of a day when this baby, now grown will ride into Jerusalem on a donkey just his mother entered Bethlehem carrying her precious child. We recall a garden where Jesus pleaded with his heavenly father to spare him the agony of the cross. We reflect with hope that this baby who was born to die was raised from the dead by his heavenly father. And we sing with the poetry of the Revelation of John that this same baby—grown, crucified and risen from the dead—will return to complete this sacred story: King of kings, Lord of lords who shall reign for ever and ever.

Lest you think this is some fantastic mystical description, think about your own experience of this sacred time. Is it not crowded with the memories and associations of Christmas' past? Is there not the awareness of the impact of the future? Are all not gathered right

here with us? It is why the season, as rich as it is, is also painful. For we miss those who are no longer with us whether through death or estrangement. We bring our worries about the uncertainty of the future. And so it is that we are invited into the larger sacred story which like a calm yet steady river carries us though and helps us to know that God sees us in our joy and our sorrow with love too deep for words. And so it is as well that we can begin catch a glimpse that our small stories are part of the grand magnificent Story where life is redeemed, all wounds healed and all tears wiped away.

Which brings me back to John who, although an infant himself at the time of Jesus' birth calls to us to recognize Jesus as who he is—not just a sweet and tender baby— but savior and Lord even at his birth: who will, in time, give his life to restore the shalom shattered so long ago. Listen again to what John says about him:

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. *He was not the light;* but he came to bear witness to the light. *The true light that enlightens everyone* was coming into the world.

Why is John such an important figure? I propose his significance lies in the clarity and specificity of his role: to testify to the true light which was coming into the world. Maybe you think that this is no big deal. But believe me, the task of bearing witness to the true light in a world where there are so many forms of light which serve to distract us from the *true* light, is extremely difficult. Testifying to the true light that has come in Jesus is actually what you and I are called to do. Advent reminds us that, as much as we are to be the presence of Jesus in the world our first job is to identify with and emulate John the Baptist. We are called to point beyond ourselves to God who sent Jesus into the world to be the light that enlightens everyone.

So how do we do this?

Friends the most important step in offering the witness of John the Baptist is simply this: to know at the depth of our souls that *we are not the light*. We are vehicles for the light but we are not the light. When questioned by the priests and Levites as to who he was John's response was entirely negative: "I am *not* the Messiah." This may sound simple but every evil that the Christian church has visited and continues to visit upon the world derives from confusion upon this very point. Every conflict and hurt that I have caused and have witnessed others cause has come from the simple yet terrible forgetting that I am not the messiah.

When I, when we, forget that we are *not* the messiah we use ourselves, our standards, our values, our *right-ness* as the standard for everybody else. We develop the attitude held by Lucy in Peanuts, "If everyone agreed with *me*, *they'd* be right." When people fail to live up to our standards and expectations we are tempted to sit in judgment of them. And often comes the moment when we open our mouths and let people know just how they are falling short and we cause a world of hurt and anger. Far from leading people to the true light we block the light. And the sad fact is that an object which blocks light casts a long shadow. When people justly criticize the church for being rigid and judgmental they are saying that in setting ourselves up as the true light we block that light and instead witness to darkness.

Yet there is incredible peace to be had when we realize that we are not the messiah! Put differently, there is great peace where we realize that there *is* a messiah *and we are not him*. The responsibility for Jesus' work lies with...*Jesus! We have only to find our place in his story*; and let Jesus, through the Holy Spirit accomplish God's will *through us*. It is why we pay God the big money. Can you let this good news sink in? You are not personally responsible for the salvation of the world—or even of your own self? That's God's job and in Jesus he has already

accomplished the task. Our job is to believe the Good News, say “Thank You” and point beyond ourselves to the true light which, if not blocked by people like us, can enlighten everyone. Amen.