

Last week we reminded ourselves of the double purpose of Advent. We prepare ourselves to celebrate the first coming of Christ through our meditations this month, and at the same time we look to keep ourselves prepared and ready for the second coming of Christ that we know could happen anytime. We want to ready ourselves to properly celebrate his birth, but perhaps a bit more importantly, we want to make sure we're ready for his return. And when it comes to getting ready for Jesus, there's not a much better instructor than John the Baptist, the one chosen to be Jesus' forerunner, to go on ahead of him and prepare people for Jesus' public ministry. In our first mid-week service we saw how God kept his promise to prepare us for the Christ through John. And our reading from Luke today records the beginning of John's ministry for us: <Read text: Luke 3:1-6>.

Did you notice the sort of "double anchor" that Luke gives us in this section? The actual content of the message, what happened, was only one verse in the middle. John the Baptist came and preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But before that we get a long spiel of names and after that we get a quote from the book of Isaiah. Maybe you think; why? Why waste all that time and not spend more time telling us about the things John actually said and did?

Of course nothing in scripture is without purpose. Even those long, boring lists of names in the Old Testament have a reason. I'm not going to tell you what right now, that's not what we're talking about. Though their purpose is similar to what we have here. You see, those opening three verses are important, because they are filled with names and places and a solid timeframe. As Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write his gospel account, he spent a great deal of time tracking down the specifics and filling in the details that the other gospel writers didn't focus on. Because of this, we can read this and be confident that this is a historical record. It's not a nice story, it's not some allegorical moral play. It really happened at a real point in the turning of our planet. Other historical documents of the time verify the rulers and priests mentioned here. We can confidently say that John the Baptist was a real man who walked the desert of Palestine, beginning near the end of the year 28 or start of 29.

Now I don't bring this up because I think anyone here doubts that the events recorded in the Bible are real, but we are so far removed from them, that maybe there's sometimes seems to be a "disconnect" between what is recorded in the Bible the rest of human life, whether that's the other history we learn in school or just between scripture and the lives we have now. It can almost feel like the Biblical events took place in a separate vacuum and weren't part of the rest of our natural history. But of course you can't separate God from the world like that. And so the Holy Spirit records these details for us to assure us that this happened in our history.

And of course the other anchor point here is when Luke references the prophet Isaiah to show that John was expected. Maybe not by name, maybe not the specifics of his work, but God planned on him showing at this time all along. Again we talked about God keeping this specific promise this past week. We don't really find this terribly striking either, because the gospel writers frequently reference Old Testament prophecies that find their fulfillment in the time of Christ. Still, this builds on the opening part to show us that this isn't just random history taking place that we're reading about. This is history as God always intended it. Again we have it clearly recorded in history that this was predicted ahead of time and came to pass. It seems so unreal, and yet it really did happen. It really was there, nearly 2000 years ago that John began preparing the way for the Lord.

And that was his purpose, that was his message. To prepare a way for the Lord. No, not a literal road for the Messiah (though, being only six months or so younger than John, he was actually walking around the area at the time). No, the idea was to prepare a way for the Lord into their hearts. We know that the only way a person can be saved is to believe and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. We know that the only way a person can have this faith is if the Holy Spirit creates that faith in a person. We know that the way the Holy Spirit has chosen to work is through the Word of God. The actual work is all done by God. But we know that the message can be rejected. We know that, even worse, it can simply be ignored. The Holy Spirit can work the miracle of faith if it can get to the heart, but the more obstacles a person throws in the way on the path to the heart, the more mountains and valleys and crooked roads, the harder it is for the work to be accomplished.

And so this was what John was there to do. He had to blast through all the rocks of pride and fill in all the ditches of doubt that the people had. Now at his time, to the audience he was preaching, there was no doubt that there was just the one true God. To the Jews, the Lord was an assumed quantity. What wasn't obvious was how the Lord felt about them, what their standing before him was. They believed that simply because they were descendants of Abraham that God would rescue them. They believed that it was their outward obedience to the Law of Moses meant God was happy

with them. They believed they were saved by their rituals to God. John had to level out these prideful thoughts of the people. He had to show them that they weren't as good as they thought they were. He had to teach them of their sin so they would understand just how deeply the required God's intervention, particularly in the form of the coming Messiah.

Now, the reason I spent so much time here talking about the historical grounding of John's work and what he did in detail is because there's a great deal of similarity between then and now. As I said, we are just as much in the process of preparing for Jesus coming as the people were in John's day. Not so much that we need to be ready to celebrate Christmas, but that we need both to ready ourselves for Jesus' second coming, and we need to carry on John's work today by preparing the way for the Lord in unrepentant hearts.

And we need to take this double task seriously, because like what we have recorded for us here, Jesus' second coming will be a literal historical event. He will come to this world; the same world we exist in. God is as active in our history now as he was in the history of the Jews. And he is ordering events to a point of time when Jesus will return. We can't separate this from our lives, it's part of the world we live in. It's real. It's coming. And it has been prophesied just like John was, just like Christ was. The New Testament and even parts of the Old speak plainly about the return of Christ. It's a very real thing that is definitely going to happen.

The difference here is that when Christ comes again it won't be so that people can learn about him and believe in him to be saved. That has already come and doesn't need to again. No, when Christ returns it will be to see who has believed in him and who will be saved because of it. The work of preparing hearts for the Lord is all the more vital because of this. He could return at any time and then it's over. No more extra time on the clock.

And this work of John the Baptist continues today. Hearts have not changed since his time. They are still full of mountains and valleys and crooked roads and rough places all trying to stop the message of Jesus from reaching the center. All of these obstacles thrown down by the sinful nature to keep a person from even listening to the truth and to do everything possible to reject it if it is somehow heard. The forerunners of the gospel, the servants of God in this world, go ahead and tear down the mountains and fill in the valleys to give God's word its best opportunity to work. If you've ever heard the term "pre-evangelism", that's essentially what this is.

Of course, the obstacles are different than John's time. God is no longer an assumed quantity. The mountains of pride may not be stronger or larger, but this lack of acknowledging the Lord certainly increases ego and arrogance. People now want to believe that they are smarter for not believing in some "god" anymore. It's not enlightened or scientific to cling to such outdated notions. And of course there's the age old notions that "I'm a good enough person that if there were a god he'd like me well enough." and "If there is a heaven I'll be able to find my own path there."

Our tool used to prepare the way to the heart hasn't changed since John's time. Every one of us needs to spend time looking in the mirror of God's Law to see that they have no reason to be as full of pride as they think. Seeing who we really are in the law silences every objection and leaves a person with nowhere to go and nothing to hide behind. Once a person is aware of their sin, once the path has been thoroughly cleared, then Jesus may enter in without trouble. And then the healing can begin.

And remember that as we carry out this process for those who need Jesus, we continue to do this for each other as well. We all have that old heart within us that's constantly trying to push Christ back out and rebuild all those roadblocks. We need to keep looking to God's law and gospel to keep that path ready and open for our Savior. Just like we help others prepare, we need each other to keep ourselves ready.

He is coming. And what happens when he comes is a matter of life and death. Don't leave it to any kind of chance. Don't take any kind of risks with it. Use his word in your life to straighten up the path to your heart. Let him live there as fully as he can. And then help others do the same. As you think about his coming at Christmastime, let that remind you that Jesus really is coming again. Straighten out his path. Be ready. Amen.