

ARE YOU THE ONE?

MATTHEW 11:2-11

DECEMBER 10, 2023

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The gospel lesson for this the morning returns us to the story of John the Baptist. The one we met the first Sunday of advent as the one *“crying in the wilderness to call upon people to repent and prepare the way of the Lord.”*

John has now been imprisoned and as he sits in jail he ponders the question, *“Is this really the one who is to come or should we look for another?”* And so, he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask the question. Jesus response to him is very helpful. He did not give the explanation I love from John’s Gospel about how *“in the beginning the Word was with God and the Word was God”*—and telling us that this *Word become Flesh and dwelt among us*. Rather he simply said, *“go and tell John what you see and hear: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”*

In Luke’s telling of the story of John it reminds us that when John was asked by the people what they needed to do to prepare for the coming of the Messiah he said they were to repent and to show by their living that they had repented.

Several people asked him what that might mean in their lives. They wanted to know what they were supposed to do. The crowds asked him, *“What then should we do?”* In reply he said to them, *“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”*

Then, even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, *“Teacher, what should we do?”* He said to them, *“Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”*

Soldiers also asked him, *“And we, what should we do?”* He said to them, *“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.”*

THE QUESTION THEN BECOMES OURS: *“WHAT ARE WE TO DO?”* and ARE WE THE ONE CALLED OUT TO DO IT?

To some extent this was the question of the sermon for last Sunday. Because, you see, all of this was the follow up response to the passage from the prophet Isaiah which read: *“the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”* In other words they were to prepare a highway for the Lord to travel on.

Some of you have been talking about the road building project east of town on route 13 that is finally coming to a manageable stage. Some have been giving their opinions about the necessity of three lanes in both directions between here and Marion and keep asking what is that little road they are building beside it. Some think all of it is a good idea while others are not for sure.

But, not only have some been people been talking about that as good news, but it seems this time of year, in particular, the media--radio, T.V. and print start talking and writing about good deeds ALMOST as much as they have been writing about all the carnage that takes place in our world and community. I have been reading and hearing about random acts of kindness, and many not so random. I have seen this church basement full of gifts of love as we received a good number of items for the food bank from the Boy Scout Drive. I have talked with others who have worked

with the Marine Corp Toys for Tots and others for the Salvation Army Angel Tree and collection kettles. Many of you participated in the Spirit of Christmas program. Yet others have decided that it was more important for them to take what they would have spent on each other and spend it on persons who are going through some particularly difficult times. There are all sorts of road construction going on and bridges being built that span rivers of distrust and alienation.

In addition to the question, “*What should we do?*” I have suggested the follow up question for this sermon is, “*Are we the one to do it?*” I have seen people respond TO THIS QUESTION by simply being themselves in their part of the world.

Did you notice that in the instructions given by John the Baptist and later stated again by Jesus, that no one was asked to do the impossible. They were not given the problem of world peace, or world hunger, or world wars, to solve. They were simply asked to look at their own world and answer the question, “*What should I do to show gifts that demonstrate my new state of having repented*”?

The story of Christmas is talked about in the church and given a name in theological jargon which is “the incarnation.” It is the doctrine of how God became a human being and lived among us. And, in his coming he taught things very similar to those of John the Baptist. But he also asked that people simply respond to the call to be disciples by changed lives. Few were asked to pack up everything and take off to a far-off place to live out their discipleship. Most simply were invited to live the life of the Christ in the communities of which they were a part and keep their eyes open to opportunities to being like God to those who desperately needed to see and hear from God.

All that was asked for was that people hear what the good news was, to learn what God wanted his people to live like, and then to be open to the opportunity to show justice, and love, and offer grace whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself. Just be ready when God needs someone to step forward.

In the Incarnation, a number of unexpected people, like Mary and Joseph, are pushed on to the stage of history to act out major parts in the transformation of the world. It is also about odd people stepping out on to the stage of God’s dealings with the world. Tom Long tells this story:

“Not long ago, a friend told me about a church drama troupe that presented, as a special event on the weekend before Christmas, a “Dessert and Drama” production of Charles Dickens’ classic A Christmas Carol. The church fellowship hall was transformed into a theater, folding chairs clustered around tables, all facing a makeshift stage fitted with painted backdrops of the tenements and sooty chimneys of nineteenth century London.

When the audience gathered and were handed their programs, some were amused to note that the part of the tightfisted Ebenezer Scrooge was being played by the chairman of the church board, a gentle man of quite un-Scrooge-like generosity. They were impressed, though, by the skills and energy he brought to his part. He growled his way through the opening scenes, ringing out every “Bah! Humbug!” with miserly ill will. He shivered with fright and dreadful self-recognition as he was encountered by the series of Christmas ghosts.

The final scene called for a transformed and jubilant Scrooge to chase the shadows of the remorseful night and to greet the light of Christmas Day by flinging open his bedroom window and bellowing festively to the startled city street below, “Me-e-r-rr-y Christmas, everyone ! Me-e-r-rry Christmas!” Then Scrooge, wishing to bestow Christmas gifts upon the needy of London and looking

for someone to help dispense his cheer, was to act as if he had spied a street urchin passing by. He was to say: "Hey you, boy. I've got something wonderful for you to do!"

But something beautiful and unexpected happened. When the radiant and transformed Scrooge beckoned from the window, framed in the set for the play, "Come up here, boy, I've got something wonderful for you to do." a six-year-old boy in the audience, seated with his family who were members of the congregation, spontaneously rose from his chair in response to this jubilant and generous call and walked on stage, ready to do "something wonderful."

The actor playing Scrooge blinked in disbelief. There was now an unscripted child from the audience standing on center stage. What was he going to do now? The audience held its breath. Then the person of faith beneath the veneer of Scrooge took charge. Bounding down from his window perch, he strode across the stage and cheerily embraced the waiting boy. "Yes, indeed," he exclaimed, his voice full of blessing. "You are the one, the very one I had in mind." Then he gently led the boy back to his seat in the audience, returned to the stage and resumed the play. When the curtain calls were held, it was, of course, this boy, the one who had felt himself personally summoned from his seat, who received, along with old Ebenezer himself, the audience's loudest and warmest applause."

All this is representative of what we are supposed to do in response to what we are to do after we have repented.

This time of the year we read a lot from the book of Isaiah. And, one of the best known part of the book of Isaiah is the story of what led up to his call to be the prophet. It is another story of repentance. It was similar to what John the Baptist was saying to those he called out in the wilderness and invited to repent and live the life worthy of repentance.

Isaiah was like all of us. He was a part of a community and found himself being wrapped up in the sins of the community. Even the worship of the people was not acceptable to God because it consisted of religious festivals and offerings that had little to do with the actual lives and intentions of those who were invited to come to worship.

Before his call the writer tells about the sins of the people. He told of how they did not "*look out for each other*" and used their position and their wealth for purposes that made life more difficult for other people. Things they probably did not intentionally set out to do but something that happened to them as they tried to "*keep up with the Jones*" and lusted about wealth and the latest car or electronic gadget like we do today. And as was the story of much of the Old Testament, the people no longer trusted the God who delivered them from bondage and so they began to build alliances with other nations instead of acting like those called to be the "*light to the nations.*"

So, the story of Isaiah begins when he was in the temple one day for worship and the setting itself let him to see his participation in all the sins of the people. Isaiah said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts."

This is followed by his story of conversion. "*Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."* 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

Thus, Isaiah heard the call of God and repented and became the instrument, who by the way

he lived his new life in the community was able to demonstrate the will of the Father and move others to repentance. Likewise, Paul in the New Testament on the road to Damascus was convinced that Christ was the messiah and so repented and turned from persecuting Christians to work tirelessly in establishing churches throughout the region.

The writer of our Advent Study reminds us that Jesus may take us just as we are but He does not leave us that way. He tells us this story: *“A young plumber once timidly told me that Jesus had surprised him one night as he was coming home late from work. “As real as you please. There he was. Standing in front of me, on my back porch, like he had been waiting, like he needed me for something.”*

When I asked why he had never told anyone about the back porch advent he replied, “If what I saw was really real, if Jesus is true, if he wanted me, then I couldn’t afford to admit that Jesus is real or I’d have to be a different me.”

John the Baptist announces not just a change of heart, repentance, but that this should lead to the advent of a whole new world, the recognition of which is bound to result in a new you.

If what John the Baptist preaches is true, then we’ve got to change, repent, allow ourselves to be turned upside down, or risk looking ridiculously out of step with the regime change that John announces. Come on make King Herold nervous. Be baptized and begin being the revolution, as our author of the Advent Study suggested.

Like the young lad who was prepared to come on the stage of life at a moment when it seemed that he was definitely the one being beckoned to do *“something wonderful,”*—this could well be any of us.

“Oh come, let us adore him,” we sing. But, most often we come to church expecting to hear confirmed what we have always thought before we came here. We come, expecting the fulfillment of all our desires, the confirmation of all our prejudices and preconceptions.

See? The baby Jesus has a face just like our face, we reason. He is cuddly and cute; what harm could there be in a baby?

But I, who am invited by God to preach the Good News, am here to warn you: Take care as you gaze into the manger. Beware coming too close to the savior. Think, before you hold out your hands, you don’t know where He might lead you. There is a risk.

If you are willing to take that risk, I invite you to this new life John the Baptist calls us to, to offer your gifts, or your prayers, or yourself or all three. And live lives that show you are working on repentance. Are you to one called to this day you live in to show the works of those who have repented and believe in the gospel?