

Sermon: Advent 5

The Rev. Kim Hoop

December 10, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

And what a messenger he was! John the Baptist a forerunner of Jesus, foretold by the prophets and divinely inspired. He came to the people to prepare them for the coming of God and his Kingdom through the birth of a child.

And not just any child. God's child — God's Son . And that is what Mark calls the Good News. This is what his Gospel is all about. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, a combination of the human and the divine. Through him God will enter this world to accomplish all that he had promised and more, as John Shea states "This is a story of a beginning that has no ending."

Mark describes John as the messenger, and the use of messengers was not uncommon during the time when Kings ruled. Before traveling Kings would send out a messenger to check the roads, make sure travel was safe and to let the people know that the King was on the way so that they could prepare for his arrival.

John too prepared the people through his preaching and baptism of repentance, confession and forgiveness of sin. He was preparing the people for one who would cleanse not just the outside of the body, but for Jesus, who would cleanse the "inside, a persons heart, mind and soul, by the Holy Spirit, causing a transformation that would allow people to experience and respond to God in their lives."

And so the people waited.

We too practice waiting and preparation, (during the season of Advent) for the second coming of Christ. We have the advantage of knowing that the first coming already took place and ...that we wait for and celebrate that on December 25th.

I don't know about you, but for my brother and I (as children) the days and weeks before Christmas dragged on forever. And I think we were in at least in good historical company. The inventor of the Advent Wreath, who also ran a school for children designed a wreath so that the children at the school could count the days and weeks before Christmas themselves instead of asking him on a daily basis.

John was not so concerned about a specific time frame, only that one who was coming was much greater than he. So who was John the Baptist?

He was thought to be an Essene, and was a member of the Qumran Community (where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found). He knew that he was a part of Gods plan--but only as a transitional figure in history, pointing the way to Christ. He was strong in spirit but humble in nature, feeling unworthy to untie Jesus's sandal, a task so menial that even slaves did not perform it.

He dressed like the prophet Elijah, perhaps to remind the people of the prophets in history and what they proclaimed.

The prophets also foretold of John's mission , and, as you may remember John leaped in his mother Elizabeths womb when he heard the voice of Mary, Jesus's mother. John ate and lived simply and although he baptized he did not invent the idea. Baptism had its roots in Jewish ceremonial rites and, for example when Gentiles wanted to convert to Judaism they were first circumcised and then baptized / washed.

During Johns time, life was hard. The people were under Roman rule and there had been no prophets for centuries.

John functioned as a prophet and witness to God, his baptism was open to everyone. He called the people to return to God, to repent and confess their sins. For the Jews it was a call to once again "affirm their identity as God's people. A call to the desert and to

come back to the promised land through baptism. There would be a new Exodus, not an exodus from the captivity of the Pharaoh of Egypt, but from the captivity of sin" Shea points out that John the Baptists real mission was incomplete (and John the Baptist knew this) he was to prepare the people thru baptism to empty themselves of sin, to wait and to welcome the Holy Spirit which Jesus would bring. The people had to be ready with open minds and hearts to receive something more which only Christ had to offer.

While gathering information to put together this sermon, I wondered about the silence of God. Once again the prophets have not spoken for centuries. Jesus had promised to come again, but for now the heavens are silent.

But.... If a prophet from God, like John should appear, I wonder what he would say to mankind today? Perhaps the message would be the same as Johns message 2,000 years ago.

Culturally things are different from the time of John. Today we do not live in community or with extended family. We have different types of jobs, advanced levels of health care, we are mobile and of course we have technology. And we do know that Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

But are we really so different as people?

We are all God's children, we are all sinners in need of repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is defined as a change of heart that is followed by a change in behavior. It involves looking truthfully at ourselves and being accountable for our actions or the lack thereof.

We have the teaching of Jesus, how he wants us to live our lives as his followers--and it is the same message that he gave in person to people 2000 years ago.

The people in John and Jesus's time had many of the same individual and social issues that we have today...hunger, homelessness, inequality (the haves and the have nots), disease, lawlessness, hatred, adultery, and the list goes on.

I wonder if a prophet today wouldn't say to mankind, repent, have a change of heart and behavior, reach out and help those in need or trouble, and to those who are different, take a stand on the troubling issues of our time, love our neighbors as ourselves, look deep within ourselves and face what we find there, relying on and returning to God to help us, act as disciples of Christ and share the Good News. Egads... I know I have a lot of work to do.

We do know and believe in our hearts and confirm in our liturgy : Christ will come again. Prophet or no prophet, perhaps we should all clean up our act (as one source so succinctly put it) and begin to prepare our hearts and minds. He will be back... are we ready??

Kim+