

SERMON – LUKE 1 JOHN THE BAPTIST – TRAILBLAZER

December 1, 2019

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is a word that you will hear a lot over the next few weeks leading up to Christmas. Now some churches do not celebrate Advent and some people may not understand its meaning and role in church history. To many churchgoers, Advent is all about wreaths, candles, and calendars. While these three things are ways in which we celebrate the Advent season and have become part of our traditions, there is a lot more to Advent than this.

Advent comes from a Latin word meaning “the coming.” It was officially established in the sixth century and was originally meant to be a time when Christians reflected on the meaning of Christmas and when new believers spiritually prepared themselves for baptism. Beginning on the Sunday nearest November 30th and running until Christmas Eve, Advent was essentially four weeks set aside to contemplate what the coming of Jesus Christ meant not only to the world, but also to each individual. Hence, while recognized and organized by the Church, Advent was also supposed to be a time of personal reflection and spiritual growth. This reflection continues today, over 1400 years later, as families still use the symbols of Advent – wreaths, candles, and calendars – to keep the real meaning of Christmas alive.

The early Christians focused on three different comings of Jesus Christ during Advent. The first was the coming of the Son of God to earth in human form as the babe in the manger. The second was the coming of Jesus into the hearts and lives of all who will accept Him as their Lord

and Savior. The third was the Second Coming when Jesus will return to earth as the conquering King at the end of time.

This morning as we prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ this year, let's discuss the man originally sent to prepare the way for Jesus, John the Baptist. Our scripture text is taken from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 57 through 66 and 76 through 80.

Read Luke 1:57-66, 76-80

John the Baptist was another of the miracle babies in the Bible. Like Isaac of the Old Testament, he was born to parents who were like many of us, senior citizens and well beyond child bearing age. Luke tells us that John's mother Elizabeth stays in seclusion for five months mostly likely to avoid all the looks and stares of the local town gossips. In a way I know what this was like. When Judy and I were in Grants, we went to the local Smith's one day to buy diapers for our Pantry to distribute to families with babies. You should have seen the expression on the cashier's face when this old gray-haired man pushed a grocery cart full of diapers up to the check-out counter. I told her that Judy and I had a lot of faith.

If you remember the story, John's father Zechariah was a priest. One day when he had the honor to burn incense in the Most Holy Place in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a baby boy who they were to name John. However, Zechariah did not believe Gabriel since his wife was old and beyond child-caring age. Because of his doubt, Zechariah could not speak until John was born. The Bible tells us that John was born six months before Jesus.

John was to be the forerunner of Jesus Christ; his mission had been foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament. One of the most familiar passages is found in Isaiah 40:3 – “A voice of one calling: in the desert prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.”

The writer of Isaiah 40 was familiar with the ancient custom of removing barriers and obstacles from the road for approaching kings. He called for the people to participate in preparing the way for the Lord’s arrival. Make the way smooth and even. Level the hills and valleys; God is coming.

In Malachi 3:1, the Lord says: “See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” Combining the prophecies of both Isaiah and Malachi, Luke sets the stage for the appearance of John the Baptist. Both Old Testament prophets foretold of John the Baptist who was to prepare the way for the ministry of Jesus. John was essentially the trailblazer of the Advent season. He was a prophet of both anticipation and preparation, the twin themes of Advent. God had sent him to prepare the way for Jesus.

In the same way during this season of Advent, we are called to prepare the way for Jesus to come into our hearts and lives. So the question for us this morning is – what should we be doing different this Christmas season if we really want to experience the presence of Christ in our lives as never before? If we want to make this the best Christmas we

have ever had? Well, let's see what we can learn from the original trailblazer for Jesus; let's see what John has to teach us this morning.

From the description of John's lifestyle in the Bible, we can assume that John lived a simple life. He didn't wear the latest fashions, but followed the example of the Old Testament prophets like Elijah and wore camel's hair. His diet was not a gourmet meal like our Thanksgiving dinners, but consisted of wild honey and locust. Now personally, I like honey, but locust is another matter. I just don't have any appetite for bugs. John's simple food, clothing, and lifestyle were a visual protest against the self-indulgence of his time and our time.

As we prepare the way for Jesus over the next four weeks, let's consider John's example. Sometimes we get so caught up in the trappings of Christmas that we fail to experience the real reason for the season. Because of all the advertisements on TV, the internet and newspapers, we tend to think that we have to buy lots of expensive presents to be really happy. As we discussed last Sunday, we fall for the misconception that the more we spend, do and have, the happier we will be, and so will all those around us. Right! If you think back over the years, you will realize that our most memorable and enjoyable Christmases have been the simple ones – the ones where we focused on Jesus and sharing His love with all around us. Wouldn't you agree?

We try so hard to find the perfect gift, especially for our loved ones. One man said that his wife has not spoken to him since last Christmas. He had asked her what she wanted for Christmas, and she said: "Oh, just surprised me." So at 3 o'clock on Christmas morning, he leaned over and shouted: "Boo!"

John was also completely focused on his mission in life – preparing the way for Jesus. He recognized his purpose in life; that the One following him was the real power. Note his words from the first chapter of Mark that John read to us earlier: “After me will come one more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John always put Jesus first, and so must we, not just at Christmas, but every day of our life.

A professor of psychology in one of our major universities gave his class of forty students a word suggestion test. He instructed them to write down the word “Christmas.” “Now,” said the professor, “right after the word “Christmas” write the first words that come to your mind regarding that day.” When the papers were turned in, the following answers were given: tree, holly, mistletoe, presents, turkey, holiday, carols, and Santa Claus. Not one person had written “the birth of Jesus Christ!” Just as there was no room in the inn for the baby Jesus on Christmas Eve, it appears that there is still no room for Him today in all our celebrations. Let’s change that this year; let’s put Christ back in Christmas and make Him our primary focus.

Finally, the Bible tells us that people flocked to hear John, to repent of their sins, and to be baptized. Why were so many people coming to John? Well, I think it was because the people were searching for something that they could not find in expensive gifts, parties, big homes, jobs, relationships, and even religion. They were looking for true happiness and joy, not the kind you can buy, but for peace of mind in a confused world, and for a right relationship with God that a long list of laws and rules could not guarantee. John had what they were searching for, the good news of Jesus Christ.

And just like back then, people today are still searching, and I believe now more than ever before in history. They have a nagging in their heart, a void where something is missing. And just like John, we have the answer. The answer is the babe in the manger, the young Rabbi, the Lamb on the cross, the empty tomb, and the Risen Lord – Jesus Christ. May we follow John’s example and share the Good News with our family, friends, and neighbors this holiday season. If you really want to be happy, have a warm feeling in your heart, and really experience the meaning of Christmas, then share the story with someone and watch their eyes light up and sparkle as they too experience Jesus as never before. And invite them to church, especially to our Christmas Eve Service.

One Thanksgiving, a father called a family conference and challenged them to be more disciplined in the management of their time during the upcoming busy Christmas season and to curtail excessive spending on gifts. He talked about better relationships with visiting relatives and a more congenial atmosphere around their home. He brought his speech to an end with his final rally cry of “Let’s make this the best Christmas EVER!” His little second-grade son countered his motivational speech by saying: “But Dad, I don’t see how we could ever improve on the first Christmas.” Now we certainly can’t improve on what happened that first Christmas, but we can definitely improve on how we celebrate it this year.

Let’s follow the example of John the Baptist; keep it simple, stay focused on the real reason for the season Jesus Christ, and share the Good News with someone this holiday season. May each of us be like John the trailblazer, blazing the way for Jesus into our hearts and the hearts of every one we meet. Merry Christmas!

