

Sermon

Meet John the Baptist

December 6, 2020

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Disasters make people numb, afraid and hopeless. They make us question our faith in God and wonder how the world will ever return to orderly and secure again. Floods, fires, earthquakes – natural disasters that hit our planet on a much too regular basis shaking those in their path from the comfort and security of their homes. Our mission committee presented an opportunity to support the Presbyterian Mission Disaster Relief Fund – a program that puts boots to the ground quickly helping those who have suffered the effects of natural disasters. This past Tuesday, known as “Giving Tuesday” I reflected on just what this tradition means to a faithful people on our Facebook page and how our contributions can ensure that programs like these continue and grow. There is still time to contribute if you have not yet done so – any amount is gratefully appreciated.

In the beginning of the sixth century BC, Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed much of Jerusalem, interrupted the economy and deported leading citizens to Babylon – it occupied the land for 50 years. Our scripture this morning from second Isaiah comes in the decades following with its healing and hopeful message. “Comfort, comfort my people says your God.” This message is in stark contrast to prior passages in the Old Testament where Jeremiah and Ezekiel accuse the people of causing the catastrophe with their sinfulness. But in this

passage, we turn a corner and put aside blaming and accusing and move toward hope and joy.

I think this represents in many ways the “disaster” we find ourselves in today – COVID has certainly created a path of destruction in its wake – death, sickness, exhaustion and economic hardship. And I think we all wonder if our world will ever return to an orderly and secure place again. This passage from Isaiah is one to read and think on especially during this time of Advent where we look with hopeful eyes upon the story of Jesus’s birth. “O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear.” This passage provided a new direction for the people of Israel – something new to place their hope to...rather than the destroyed temple, the collapsed monarchy or the broken covenant of the past, they set their eyes and hearts upon God’s never failing word.

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story is when Mary upon learning she is pregnant, goes to visit with her older cousin Elizabeth, who is also blessed with a miracle pregnancy in her old age. And when Mary speaks to Elizabeth, scripture tells us the baby in Elizabeth’s womb, leapt with joy. When I was expecting my children I loved that feeling especially earlier in the pregnancy when I’d be given a little reminder, almost a tickle, that there was someone inside me that would change my life forever. A feeling, a slight movement, that only I could feel. And, What I love about this story of Mary and Elizabeth is how these two women knew that the children they carried in their womb would not only change their lives but would change the world. But during this part of the story, it was something only they really truly understood. And when Mary saw that joy in

Elizabeth's eyes, she then was able to surrender to the joy she had felt from the time the angel came upon her to tell her what was going to happen next.

It was clear Elizabeth's child knew who Jesus was before he was born into this world – this child was divinely placed in Jesus family for a very special purpose. John the Baptist as the world and we came to know him, was an important figure in each of the four New Testament Gospels. He is most influential at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and was understood as the "forerunner" for the Messiah. John has an effective and successful ministry in his own right as mentioned in our scripture "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." He was much more of a natural, laid back kind of preacher – unlike Jesus with his dynamic and bold ministry. John lives in the wilderness near the river Jordan where Jesus is baptized. John was 'clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey." I think of him more like a back woodsman – John was an incredibly important part of Jesus ministry in that he was the great preparer for the Messiah –He baptizes the faithful to cleanse them of their sin. We have all witnessed baptism in its simplicity – yet they are profoundly beautiful. They provide an element of innocence when we offer ourselves or our children to God and create a lifelong partnership of faith. And when Jesus comes to John to be baptized, John has to be convinced, feeling unworthy, to do it. And he says these very profound words after Jesus' baptism..."I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." This role of ushering us into Jesus' message is profound and immensely significant.

Prepare the way o Zion, your Christ is drawing near – that wonderful Advent hymn. Prepare the way...those words resonate...prepare the way, not make the way, not build the way, not find the way – prepare. That’s what disaster relief programs do – they prepare – prepare to be available with what’s needed should the disaster hit. And for us, at this time, in this world today – we aren’t asked to make a way, to clear the way – just prepare.

Like our scripture from Isaiah – its’ time to stop blaming and focusing on the crumbled temple and start focusing on hope – hope that the answers, the healing, the strength, the elimination of the sickness – will indeed come. “See the Lord God comes with might and his arm rules for Him...he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”- Advent is a time to hear the promises spoken to the community of faith once again and then sit with them through the season. It is also a time for that community to find its own voice and speak words of comfort and gentleness to a world that is tired and hurting. We must assure those who are feeling abandoned that God will arrive and will come in gentle power.

Amen