



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, YEAR B, DECEMBER 13, 2020
ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; CANTICLE 15; JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

BE THE MESSENGER

John: 1:6-8, 19-28 [There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.]

I thought I might talk with you today about messengers, starting with famous messengers in history and literature -- you know, like the Marathon runner of Athens; or wing-footed Hermes; or Hedwig, Harry Potter's Owl. But when I Googled best messengers, guess what came up? That's right: Apps. The ubiquitous texting, the annoying Facebook Messenger, the traveler's friend What's App, and, God help us, Twitter.

Well, that made me laugh, and got me thinking about the last time I left a voicemail message for my daughter, leaving a full

explanation of what I needed and how it would work. And when she called me right back, and I said, "Hey, Kelsey. Great. You got my message. What do you think?" She said, "Mom, I saw that you called, so I called back. I didn't listen to the message. No one listens to voicemail messages anymore, Dude."

Dude.

We get our messages different ways now, don't we? All kinds of ways. More ways than we can keep track of, more ways than we can reasonably process, more ways than we even want to! How do we decide what to pay

attention to? What messages are important? Which messengers get through?

Well, the Angel Gabriel got God's message through to Mary, and she would burst forth with the *Magnificat*, her beautiful reflection that we just heard chanted. Mary heard the message, held it, and when the words welled up, they were: "My Soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" It surely wasn't an easy message to hear – that she, a young, as-yet-unmarried woman would become pregnant – but she said yes to the message. And now we pray "Hail Mary, full of grace." But I think we might rather pray, "Hail Mary, full of *hope*." Isn't that what her response in the *Magnificat* is full of: lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, God coming to help God's people. A thriving hope in what is yet to unfold.

Perhaps...you might gently point out... it was *easier* for the message to get through to Mary back then. No email strings. And her messenger was an ANGEL. Now THAT is built-in credibility, no spam filter needed. And it's probably easier to have hope when you hear a message directly from an angel, even if the message is that you have to go through something hard to have something really good unfold.

Okay. But what of John the Baptist and his message of repentance and preparation, some 30 years later? People were going to him in droves, going out into the desert to be baptized in the Jordan River. What compelled them to go out there? It was a

schlep; it was rough terrain. And John was clearly not resplendent like the Angel Gabriel. No gossamer wings there: just crude clothing of camel hair and a weathered leather belt. And his message wasn't easy to hear, either. "Make straight the way of the Lord!" Or as Matthew records it, "Repent!" Not a glorious call, exactly. So where's the hope in that – and who was John to call them out?

Because out they came! In fact, so many, many people came to John at the River Jordan, and with such excitement, that the Pharisees – who claimed authority for all questions of religious law – decided they'd better send some priests out to find out who this zealous preacher was claiming to be. As in: was he a threat to their authority?

They want to know: what was John's messenger credential, that his message should be getting through? Are you Elijah, they asked him? Now THAT would be a credential! There had not been a prophet in Israel for 400 years, and the prophet Elijah was supposed to come again. Or maybe John thought he was himself the *Messiah*?

But before they could even ask him that, John told them who he was NOT.

Today's Gospel says John confessed: "I am not the Messiah." And when they said to him: "Who are you? What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. He speaks of his mission, not of himself.

His mission is to get people ready, to prepare the way for the one who is to come. His mission is to point the way to their **hope**. He himself was not the light, but he was the one pointing to the light!

And for a people who are living in the dark, the one pointing toward the light is a compelling messenger!

John himself was not the Messiah, but he pointed in the right direction: to a light of hope, a light of faith, a light of right living. How do you imagine people felt when they went down to the river and got baptized by John, when they repented of any wrongdoing weighing on their hearts and washed themselves in preparation for the one who is to come, the one whom this amazing John says he's not even worthy to untie his sandals!

I imagine they felt HOPE. In the midst of all the difficulties and oppression of living in an Empire that didn't care about them, that took advantage of them and let them be sick and let them go hungry, made *them* struggle for a living in harsh times – so the few could hang onto the power and wealth. Which maybe led them to do things they weren't always proud of, that maybe hardened their hearts at times to bitterness or selfishness or unkind acts toward other people.

But in going to the river with John, they reclaimed their hope. They washed and repented and remembered **who they are**: *people of God, God's beloved children, people who are waiting for a promised Messiah.*

People who could hope in the voice calling in the darkness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

That MISSION, pointing to THAT light – *that* was John's credential! – reminding people to repent of the wrong acts that may be holding them down in their own life and to live freely into the light, prepared for the hope that is coming NOW!

Friends, we are deeply in that mission. It's the third Sunday of Advent, the season of preparation and anticipation. And it's Advent in COVID time. It's Advent in misinformation time. It's Advent in crazy, divisive, violent time.

AND it's Advent in vaccine-coming time. It's Advent in nearly-600-gift-cards-from-Saint-Mark's-community-for-families-we-care-about-who-are-our-neighbors time. It's Advent in seeing-Jupiter-and-Saturn's-every-800-year-great-conjunction-looking-like-the-Christmas-star time. It's Advent in blessing-at-Coffee-Hour-today-our-beloved-Canon-Cristi-Chapman-who-is-presiding-for-the-final-time-at-Saint-Mark's-now-as-she-moves-on-to-new-ministry time.

And, Why. We. Are. Here: **It is Advent in preparing-the-way-for-the-birth-of-Jesus-in-OUR-time time.** Friends, Emanuel, God with us, is not OLD news, and it's not just John the Baptist announcing this great hope. It is YOU and me. WE are the messengers; WE are the voices in the wilderness-situations of OUR times, calling "Prepare the way of the Lord." Our mission is to live into, and point to, the light that is Jesus.

Who are YOU to be this messenger, you ask? What's your credential? Your credential is the same as John's: it is the mission! To prepare your life for Jesus' coming in this holy season, and to reflect his light inside of you to others desperate for the light, by the way you live.

Are you wondering if you are *really* a messenger of the light? I know so many of you to be so. And I know so many times that light has shined my eyes toward Jesus in unexpected and blessedly powerful and comforting ways – and in blessedly light-a-fire-in-me ways, too.

You don't have to have visible angel wings, nor do you have to be an ascetic in the desert, to be the messenger this Advent. You just have to be you: God's people, God's beloved children, people who are waiting for a promised Messiah whom we *already* know. People who DO hope in the light shining in the darkness and declare "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Christmas IS coming:

BE the messenger of hope: Point to the light for yourself and for those around you.

BE the messenger of hope: Know that Christ the Savior is born, and among us; proclaim that Jesus comes AGAIN, ANEW, this Christmas and every day.

BE the messenger, and be, yourself, the hope for others, that we all live and move into the light of the Divine Love. It's not easy to live out that kind of love. But say yes to the mission and share that message of Love's birth in the way you live your life.

*God of all the ages, rouse us from sleep, and form us into a watchful people, so that, at the advent of your Son, we may be prepared, **messengers** bearing witness to your light.*

Prepare the way of the Lord!



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL