

“Understanding God’s Mission”

(The Baptism of Fire)

Isaiah 45:22-25

Matthew 3:10-12

Scripture Lesson from the OT: “Turn to Me and be saved all the ends of the earth; for I AM GOD and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, and every tongue will swear allegiance. They will say of Me, “Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength.” Men will come to Him and all who were angry at Him shall be put to shame. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel will be justified and glorified.”

Scripture Lesson from the NT: “And the axe is already laid at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. As for me I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

This is the word of the Lord for the people of God.

An old farmer once commented to his pastor how at Annual Conference the main topic of the bishop’s sermon was how to get more people to attend church. He said, “I’ve been to a lot of farmers meetings, but I have never ever heard a single person feel the need to speak about how to get the cattle to eat. We usually spend our time discussing the right kind of food to make them healthy and get them ready for market.”

“He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Those were the words of John the Baptist concerning the mission of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the message that that drew the people from Jerusalem out into the wilderness of Judea to the Jordan River to be baptized.

As I pondered these words coming from the mouth of the man who Jesus said was the greatest of all the prophets, I began to wonder what exactly the people expected to hear coming from him. What words did they think would come from the mouth of a man who was on fire for Jesus Christ?

Did they think his message would be an endorsement of the government?

Did they think his call to preach had come from the temple?

Did they think he preached his message because he enjoyed hearing the sound of his own voice echoing off the hills?

Did they think he preached repentance because they already knew and understood God's mission for them and were prepared to receive God's baptism of fire?

“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” he said.

For some of them, believe it or not, John's words may have come as a sort of comic relief because the truth about their sin was now finally out, and they were at last free from the ongoing daily drain of micro-managing their stories to keep their secrets from the world and from gossip and ridicule. In this way, John's preaching was a kind of reverse blessing, a way forward for them coming from the soft underbelly of honesty.

For others, probably most of them, John's words were more of an uninvited verbal assault against an otherwise comfortable and complacent existence. A petty annoyance to be suffered from a pedantic prophet who ought to be minding his own business instead of meddling in theirs. Either way, John remained aloof and unmoved by them as he steadfastly confronted both with the truths of God.

In a similar fashion to the farmer in our opening story-John did not speak to gather a crowd, he spoke only about what was the right kind of spiritual food to get them healthy and to make them ready for God's kingdom. As I pondered John's message to the people of his day, I got to thinking...

What if I preached like John the Baptist? What if I spoke biblical truth to y'all in the same way John did? What if I showed up on Sunday dressed in a camel hair suit with a leather belt around my waist?

I recently saw a quote in the Facebook forums: "Sugar-coated preaching leads to truth decay"-and I sure wouldn't want to ever be accused of that!

So, what if I got personal and called you out for your sins the way John did? What if I were to ask you what brought you slithering in here today you sons and daughters of snakes? Why exactly are you here today?

Have you come to see your friends? The ranks are thinning a bit, but there are still a few left here this morning.

Are you here hoping everyone will see how faithful you are to be in church on Super Bowl Sunday? Some people may be impressed, but I don't think God will.

Are you here to give God another long list of complaints that you call prayer requests? God always answers prayer, but he will never do for you anything you can do for yourself.

Are you here because your family is here and going to church is what you've always done every Sunday morning since, like... forever? Regular attendance is good, and commitment is a virtue, but you could do that virtually from the comfort of your couch watching whatever pretty face they've made a preacher.

Are you here because your ancestors built this church on family land because frankly, God doesn't need to know all the details about what your family has done or how much money they have given. That is the business of the Finance Committee to be saved for Charge Conference.

What I want to talk about today plain and simple is... you...and how you are a living witness for Jesus Christ preparing the way for the coming of God's kingdom into this community. Because friends, if the Bible is true, and we are a "people of the book" then what we do here on Sunday morning is serious soul business.

So, if you are here today because you know in your heart that you need to make some changes in the way you are living, then you must not merely wish for change for an hour or so and then go back to your sins, you must begin the change you wish for by turning away from sin and turning yourself toward God.

If that's not the reason why you are here today, then you may as well just go on with your life as it is, and crawl back into the hole you came from.

Did you like the tone of the message I just preached? Have I insulted your religious pretensions sufficiently to get your attention this morning? That was how John the Baptist preached to the people out there in the wilderness. That was what John said to them. That is the message of repentance.

So then, what if I preached like John the Baptist would if he were here this morning? What if I dressed in camel hair with a leather belt around my waist? What would y'all think about that? Do you think it might make a difference? I mean, nothing else has worked so far, so what do you think? Well, I suspect that if I were to be so bold, there would probably be several different responses.

Some of you might think, "I knew from day one that any preacher from NJ with a ponytail couldn't be trusted to preach the gospel!"

Some of you would maybe smile politely and nod appropriately, and let every word of it go in one ear and out the other like you have done every other Sunday.

Some of you would maybe lower your eyes and look at the floor until the heat of the moment died down and passed.

There is a good chance that there would probably be a few parking lot meetings and some gum flapping after church about the nerve of the preacher to talk down at us like that. The D.S. might even get a call to let him know that waiting until June will be too long for us to get rid of this guy.

No siree, that kind of preaching straight into the faces of the people was not what they expected to hear from John in the wilderness, and it is not what y'all expect to hear from me either when you come to church on Sunday morning. People just don't come to church on Sunday to be made uncomfortable about their sins by the paid professional in the pulpit, even if it is well within the boundaries of his job description.

Some of you may even think it to be ridiculous of the pastor to hold the church to such a high level of accountability in these modern times of soft music and easy religion.

Maybe, “What if I preached like John the Baptist would if he were here this morning is the wrong question?” Maybe the right question, the better question is “Why have I not preached in the past like John the Baptist would if he were here this morning? And even better yet, “Why have you not demanded that of me, and of every preacher who has ever stood in this pulpit?”

Lots of questions here and lots of possible answers too. I wonder though in the end that the reason I don’t do it, and the reason you don’t make me, is that we are both “too comfortable and too contented” with our lives as they are. And John’s message about getting us here on Sunday to eat the right kind of spiritual food to make us healthy is then going right over our heads.

Oh, I don’t mean by “comfortable and contented” that we are comfortable and contented because our life in Christ is already perfect, but rather that we are comfortable and contented by having settled into a place of indifference to the demands the gospel places on us.

And so we find ourselves in this place of benign resignation where we have learned how to manage our lives in a way that, at least on the surface, looks like it is working. A place where we know how to play the “good Christian” game of shadows and appearances and sometimes even win at it.

The bottom line for us is that we have found a comfortable spot to settle in our lives of pain, and we don’t want any pushy preacher messing things up with God’s inconvenient truths. And thus, we practice the old pandemic mantra where: “We go along to get along.”

Historically, this has generally been the truth for many of us in the church whether preacher or parishioner. We don’t care so much that what the cows are eating is the right food to keep them healthy, we only care that we get them here on Sunday to eat something.

So, we come to church week after week, month after month, and year after year expecting to receive affirmation and approval from God because we are after all, “Abraham’s descendants,” who have followed all the rules of the game.

And so, on Sunday morning we expect a pat on the back and an “atta boy” from our preacher affirming that though we may not have done all we could for God’s kingdom, compared to everyone else we’re doing pretty well.

And because God loves us just the way we are anyway, we don't need to do anything more for His kingdom than get on board the next bus to heaven when the time comes. The trouble with this thinking is that life as we know it continues and after a while the message starts to wear a little thin. This is true because down inside in the soul's deep places where we don't even let God go, we know what is true and what isn't.

We know the deep wounds we carry that hurt us-and have hurt others.

We know the relationships that are still broken in pieces and are in desperate need of repair.

We know the words we have spoken and the actions we have taken that are holding us back in our walk with God.

We see the hunger, poverty and injustice in our community that we have thrown a few dollars at from the church relief fund just so we could say we did our duty rather than sacrificing any of our own time, or money to really reach out with the love of Christ.

In short, we know the truth about ourselves, and we know what kind of life we are living, and we know that it doesn't nearly measure up to the reality of God's truth, so we fill ourselves with processed devitalized pseudo-spiritual food that keeps us alive, but denies us the true spiritual health and vitality we desperately want and need.

The truly sad part of this charade is that deep down in our hearts and souls we are convinced that despite the biblical claims of the resurrection, death is the inevitable end toward which we are inexorably moving and that nothing and no one, not even the Son of God can keep this from happening to us.

Friends, this is not a pretty picture of the reality we face, and is not the message of affirmation and approval you want to hear from your preacher this morning. To settle for this pathetic reality as being the best we can do only serves to keep us stuck where we are with no hope for the future.

Some may believe that their circumstances will improve by changing the channel in the pulpit to a more affirming and uplifting station but in the end, it will prove

to be only an illusion that denies us the possibility of ever truly moving forward. As I continued pondering these things another question came to mind.

Could it be that something as good for us as contentedness may actually serve to blind us to the life that God wants for us? The answer that came to me was “yes,” because it deceives us into believing that what we already have is as good as it gets. This “take-it-or-leave it” thinking will always place us in a static state of spiritual resignation where growth is denied and there is no way forward.

When we begin thinking this way, we need to hear someone tell us the truth to reawaken our spirit into action. We may not welcome the messenger or the message, but to be hurt by truth is better than to be killed by indifference.

Thus, we need a truth-teller that says our life in Christ must be one of constant growth into holiness and that the God of Christmas is always coming to aid us even in our darkest hours. This is the truth of John the Baptist. These are the words coming from the “voice of one crying out from the wilderness” ever prodding and calling us to a life that must be lived in a state of holy discontent.

Friends, the real issue we face this year is not that we are either good or bad people, but that we are contented with our mediocrity to where we have become indifferent to the cries of the prophet, in essence, too content to repent. That is why every year during the season of the church preceding Easter that we call Lent; we need to hear again the words of John the Baptist:

“Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.”

I would like to leave you with some hard truths about repentance that I believe will be useful in your own spiritual journey.

1. Repentance will not make God’s kingdom come to us, but repentance is the pre-condition that is necessary for its coming. As such, repentance is the soul’s best response to the reality of our fallen condition before God.
2. Repentance is the method of purification for the soul symbolized by John’s water baptism of the people in the river Jordan.
3. Repentance is our agreement with God that we have sinned and stand in need of redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ.
4. Repentance is saying “yes” to the offer of grace and mercy from “the one who is more powerful than us” to whom we must “turn to be saved.”

5. Repentance is more than simply saying, “Lord, I’m sorry for my sins.”

Repentance is a change of heart that requires not only sorrow for past sins, but also an intentional turning of one’s face toward God.

In 1 John 2:2 we read that “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

The key to the prophetic message is the propitiation of Jesus Christ, His sacrifice for us that fully satisfies the wrath of God. This was the meaning of John the Baptist’s exclamatory statement to the people: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

The vital importance of the prophetic message is found in the lifting up of Jesus Christ (He, Himself...) as the only propitiation for the sins of the world. A prophet is a preacher who is bound by holy matrimony to the mission and purpose of his Lord and Master.

The prophet is never to proclaim the gospel message from his own viewpoint, but only from the viewpoint of Jesus as “the Lamb of God.” It is easy for Christians to be part of a church or religious society that testifies to what Jesus has done for them through salvation or divine healing, or through a physical blessing of some kind. However, when the Holy Spirit comes to them, He does not concern Himself with blessings and special preferences, He simply brings them into oneness with Jesus Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 9:16 the apostle Paul writes, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.” Please notice here that Paul does not say, “Woe is me if I do not preach about what God has done for me” but rather, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” And this is the gospel according to John the Baptist: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”

So, what do you think would happen in our church if I preached like John the Baptist today? What do you think would happen in our church if I preached like John the Baptist every Sunday? What do you think our churches would be like if we expected to hear messages from our pastors like John the Baptist preached?

All good questions indeed. As I pondered these questions, the thought occurred to me that if I preached every Sunday like John the Baptist preached, and y'all responded to the message like the people did by the River Jordan back in his day, we all might finally at last begin to understand God's mission for our church!

Can y'all say "amen" to that? "Amen and amen."