

The Unexpected Messenger

Philippians 1:3-11 and Luke 3:1-6 | Second Sunday of Advent | December 8, 2024 | Deacon Nina Joygaard , preaching

God's grace and peace to you, dear siblings in Christ.

Our gospel reading for today might be a little difficult to follow. If you had trouble tracking, today – don't worry. It is a tricky one. The reading opens with all these names and places that are complicated and not readily identified in today's context. Imagine, if you will, a field reporter doing an in-depth investigative journalism piece from the desert wilderness along the banks of the Jordan River.

They are setting the scene as much as they possibly can – reporting the time and where it happened in the years of the Ceasar's time in power. Reporting where they are in the area of Judea – along the region around the Jordan River. And also reporting who was the governor and the king serving in that area at the time – as well as name-dropping some of the neighboring governors and how they were related to King Herod. Our on-the-scene reporter also informs us of who were the high-priests at the time. You see, they are trying to give us all the information to show that their investigative work is accurate – and for us to make the connections of what is happening: politically, geographically, economically, and religiously.

This reporter also gives us a bit of the backstory on the person and events they are covering. This man John (whom we call John the Baptist) –is the son of Zechariah. He is out in the wilderness – receiving the Word of the Lord. And this John, we're told, is announcing a baptism of forgiveness of sins AND proclaiming words from the prophet Isaiah ... See, they did their research on his speech!

Then the scripture makes a HUGE shift – and instead of the investigative reporter setting the stage – it switches to LIVE coverage of John the Baptist and the message he's sharing.

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His style and language are very different in style from the reporter – it is poetic and evocative. This is language that resonates deeply with his audience. It is absolutely familiar from their religious background because it sounds almost exactly like how the prophet Isaiah proclaimed hope to their Jewish ancestors returning from exile (Isaiah 40:3-8). As one Bible scholar describes it, the language of this poem “vibrates with the infectious energy of change.”

So here we are – we’re ready to take it all in. We have the setting. We know who oversaw the political and religious systems. We know the time and the place. But instead of the prophet Isaiah describing a hopeful future – we have John the Baptist – as a living proclamation. Instead of describing a voice in the wilderness, he IS THE voice out in the shrubby desert along the Jordan River.

John the Baptist is embodying that infectious energy of change. Boldly inviting his hearers to prepare the way of the Lord. John is announcing the coming of one who has been long-awaited. Get ready everyone – it’s time to prepare. He cries out of a new way forward. A sure and steady path. A solid way – that’s smooth and straight – accessible and safe. A path upon which “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” The promise he proclaims is expansive and inclusive. It isn’t an insider proclamation to only his Jewish siblings or simply a word of hope for those who have enough faith. But his announcement is about eyes to be opened to a God coming right among us as salvation that we can SEE.

John’s message shines a light of hope. Radiates love and equity and the hoped-for future of the people.

Now, I’ve got to be honest. John the Baptist seems a bit of a surprising choice to bring this amazing message. It’s a bit mysterious that God chose John the Baptist to announce God’s salvation for all flesh. We just had this on-the-ground reporter telling us all of the people who had power. People of influence who had assistants and could make official proclamations. Leaders with titles and authority who had

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countless followers to listen to them and do as they said. Leaders, mind you – both in the geopolitical space and within the religious hierarchy. But “Luke tells us that ‘the word of God came’ ... not to any of the important and powerful ones named. The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. A NO one in A NO-where place. This is how God works – first through the no ones in the nowhere places.”

And, come to think of it, God’s salvation coming to us in a helpless child born into poverty is also a surprising path. God entering our world by a teenage mother, placed into a feed trough surrounded by farm animals is a bit mysterious too. God in the manger is not what we anticipate when we desperately hope to see the salvation of the LORD.

Yet, it is this NO one in a NO-where place who announces the mystery of God at work among us. Bible scholar Dr. Corri Carvalho beautifully describes this as the “wholly unexpected, unearned and unprecedented divine compassion: the entrance of Jesus onto the world stage.”

That mystery is announced to us again today. Dear friends, Advent is a time of opening eyes and preparing hearts to truly SEE the salvation of God.

How might we prepare the way for the entrance of God-among-us?

How might our eyes be opened to the mystery of God?

Christ is coming, dear ones.

The prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist proclaim to us. “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

May our hearts and ears and eyes be open – to the Messiah among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes:

¹ Anthea Portier-Young, Commentary on Isaiah 40:1-11, Second Sunday of Advent, WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 12/7/24.

² Gail Ramshaw, Lectionary Notes, Day Resources on Sundays and Seasons. Sunday, December 8, 2024, Second Sunday of Advent

³ Corrine Carvalho, Commentary on Isaiah 40:1-11: Second Sunday of Advent (Year B). WorkingPreacher.org. Accessed 12/7/24.