

“ROOM IN YOUR HEART”
A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Belleville, IL
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Nov. 30, 2025
(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture today is from the Gospel of Mark 1:1-8. The Proclamation of John the Baptist.

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight,’ ”*

so John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So, this past last week we went out to Massachusetts to spend Thanksgiving with my wife’s family, and the weather was actually nicer than it was here, so that doesn’t happen often.

We had the pleasure of flying Southwest Airlines. Southwest, the airline that is still holding on to that idea like, how about we just open up the doors and let people fight for their seats and see what happens? I mean, they have you line up in a certain

order, but then once you get on the plane, it's just a free-for-all. You just take whatever seat you want. Now when this was first started – when Southwest first started this policy, it was done specifically to load the planes quicker so that they could get out quicker. They found that rather than people kind of getting on the plane in different groups and having assigned seats, it could happen quicker. That has completely fallen apart.

Now they found out they can make an extra buck or two because you know you can buy your way to the front of the line for Southwest Airlines now. And it keeps tempting you every time you check in. You're like, hey 60 bucks and you could be at the front of the line, you know and I guess people pay it cause there's people up there. So, yeah, it's a complicated mess now and the thing is that we know how to load an airplane. Like we've cracked the code on this.

The most brilliant scientific minds on the planet have figured out how to do this. They even have a name for it. It's called the Steffen method, not to be confused with the New York City nightclub reviewer, Stefon. This is a different Steffen method. But it basically works like this. The seats in the back of the plane, you get on first and that row seats down and then the second to last row gets on the plane, then the third to last row. And if you do that, that is the fastest way to load an airplane. We know this and not a single airline does it. Because while the original idea was, we want to get people on the plane, someone decided to shift it around and say we want to find another way to make money off people on the way in.

And so, we sell status. We sell you can buy your way to the front of the line. If you fly often enough, you get to board first. Quite frankly, I think if you fly all the time, you ought to board last. You get to do this all the time. You know what you're doing. Some chump like me needs more time to figure out what to do. You can come at the last minute. You'll know where to sit, what to do.

The other thing about Southwest is that when everybody's choosing their own seats, they always leave that middle seat, don't they? Everybody wants to be on the window or on the aisle. It's like I want a view, or I want to be able to go to the bathroom. That's our choice. They leave that middle seat and if you want to make friends, when you get on the plane, pick the first middle seat and just scoot your way in and sit right there. They look at you with such disdain. It's like they were saving the seat for Elijah. Like you know, like I'm waiting for the coming of the Messiah and I saved this middle seat here because it's definitely not for you to sit in. And once again, the purpose of all the seats on the airplane is for the people to sit in them,

but we've lost that. Now we all feel like we need a buffer between us and our new neighbor for the flight.

We're all just so eager to get on that plane with our privilege and our status. And I'm gold. I'm platinum level. I'm double platinum level or whatever and then I can get on and then so that we can all sit in the same kind of seats and get those weird flavored pretzels. Like they don't even give normal pretzels anymore. Now they've got to put some weird onion, sweet salt on it or something. It's completely off of the intended purpose. Just get me on the plane and get me to my destination. On time would be nice.

The Bible passage today that we have is talking about John the Baptist, but those who originally heard it would not have been thinking so much about John the Baptist as they would have been thinking about Elijah. Because this image of John the Baptist showing up matches the description, their expectation of when Elijah would come back to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. And for hundreds of years through the Jewish tradition, there has been an empty seat that has been saved for Elijah at bris, at seder meals. You leave a seat for Elijah, and the intended purpose is to make that space in your celebration, that reminder for the expectation of the fullness of what God's going to do for the coming of the Messiah to celebrate the presence of that proclamation already there with you.

But even that lost its purpose over the years. There was this song that became really popular around the time of the Civil War called The Vacant Chair and it was about having an empty chair for the loved one who was no longer with us anymore. And so it started to creep into the tradition and in many families today, the empty chair is left for those traditional meals. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It's for Elijah, but now it's also for those who can't be with us this year, which sounds wonderful and sounds sweet, but that's not what the empty chair was there for. For hundreds of years to secure this reminder of the promise that God has for the people. It's just not its intended purpose.

The coming of Christmas has a similar effect on us. Christmas, a time for us to celebrate the presence of God already in our lives, but also the coming of Christ into this world. The expectation of Christ coming again and we find ways to fill that hope and expectation with other activities. Preparing the way for Christmas is not just making enough space to pack in as many other side traditions and events as you can. It's to make some space, an empty chair if you will, an expectation as a sign of hope and peace and love and joy in this world.

In some ways, it's kind of nice that we didn't get to decorate for Hanging of the Greens. We're going to do it this Saturday, by the way, instead of yesterday because of the weather. But maybe it's good. Maybe it's good to have that reminder that it's not all about the decorations. But don't get me wrong. I love my traditions and the minute my family starts canceling some of our traditions, I'm going to be mad. But maybe setting aside some of that, maybe just temporarily, can be a good reminder for us of what we're really trying to make space for. And making space for the presence of Christ in our Christmas is really more about accepting the ministry and mission that Christ has given to us than it is about anything else.

Even that idea, let's put the Christ back in Christmas, instead of that being a rally cry for us to go out and help the poor and the marginalized and bring blessings and healing to those who are suffering, instead we just use it as an excuse to get angry at the guy at Walmart because he said the wrong words when I walked in the door. He was supposed to say Merry Christmas, and he said something else. I'm going to put the Christ back in Christmas by belittling a greeter at Walmart. Thanks be to God. Merry Christmas!

You want to stick the Christ back in Christmas, you do it by making a mess out of your church. You do it out of generosity and of care and of love and of being a sign of hope in this world. But to make that space, to make that space for us to fill with that hope, it takes a little bit more than just simply setting aside time.

And this is the message that John the Baptist brings to the people. We're going to prepare the way for the coming of the one who is truly worthy, and the way that we make the space is out of a ritual of repentance. Of repenting. And repenting is not just a fancy church word for saying, I'm sorry. Repenting is an actual change in our behavior. It's more important. The change is a bigger part of repenting than any words that you say.

Literally, the Hebrew word for repent, teshuva, literally means to make a 180-degree turn. Remember it's not a 360 turn. This is a 360 turn. I'm still headed in the same direction. Teshuva, to repent, is to turn and go in another direction. It's to make a real change in our lives. And we each have this work to do. We each have let other things creep in to become our sources of hope in this world, our sources of peace. We've taken the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ, which if we are disciples of Christ, should be a major guiding factor in the actions of our daily lives and we've relegated it to simply sitting in a certain spot once a week.

The discipleship that we're called into, the hope that we're called into, that John the Baptist called is repentance. You need to turn from the things that fill up your life so much that you don't have time for God. It's a turn on all those things that seem to have captivated your attention and your efforts and your heart to make a space, a space in your heart, where there be room for the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ to dwell.

So that as we walk through this life it's not where can we fit in all this stuff, but instead here is this room that I have made for all that God has for me to do in this life. And I'm not going to clutter it up with the junk of this world. I'm going to clutter up with the junk of this ministry, the generous junk of this ministry, the wonderful life-giving things, of forgiveness, of caring for others, of looking for those who are suffering.

Christmas is not a time for us to circle the wagons and ensure that it happens the way we want. It's a time for us to open up and to see where Christ is calling us now. Our hope, our hope will reside in our ability to make that space to turn away from the things that would otherwise distract us. This is the Advent journey that you're asked to be on. We'll light a candle. We'll put up some decorations. We'll sing a few special songs. There will be candles on Christmas Eve and we will sing Silent Night. But the most important thing is that we make space for the one who needs the mercies that God's going to pour out through us. Let's hold on to that hope.

To God be glorified. Halleluiah and Amen.