

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT - *Year A*

December 8, 2013

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Romans 15:4-13 • Matthew 3:1-12

SERMON *By Ryan Ramsden*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want you all to think back to when you were a child. I understand this may be harder for some to do, however, humor me for a moment. And now, try and remember those times when you were...naughty. Again, I understand that this may be difficult as I am standing in front of such a good group of Christian people. However, I think we can all think of a time when we have been bad. When I think of times when I was bad as a child, I can usually hear the sound of my father's voice, which had the tendency to, as many father's voices do, raise up a little louder to make sure I knew I was in trouble and that he was not happy with me. I remember thinking sometimes, "you don't have to shout, for I am standing right in front of you". Of course, I did not say this out loud because that could have just dug me deeper.

Perhaps the raising up of his voice was necessary to convey his point; to make sure I knew what I had done was wrong. Perhaps discipline when we were bad, and of course praise when we had done good, was to **prepare us** for our adult lives, and ensure we turned out to be good people.

And then we grow up, and we might not have mom and dad around to tell us when we have done good and been bad; to make sure we live our lives as good, Christian people.

The Gospel today is about John the Baptist, **preparing** the people for the coming of the Messiah. As we journey through Advent each year, we are also **preparing** for His coming.

Now, John was an interesting character. You get a bit of a visual of him in verse four:

“Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey”.

Sounds a bit peculiar, don't you think? Someone you might look at and not take seriously, or be a little frightened by. And then when he preached, he was defiantly blunt and aggressive in his approach to convey his message. Here he begins with *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

The birth of that little baby Jesus on Christmas Eve encompasses all that is good in the world; the pure and innocent baby boy, the son of God. Are we ready for his coming? Are we worthy? As we wait in joyful anticipation for His birth, there is a lot to do to prepare for his coming. It is not as easy as some might think.

As John the Baptist instructs us, we are to repent. However, the context is quite different for today's Christians. John was anticipating the coming of Jesus, the son of God made man on earth. We live in a time where Jesus' ministry on earth has concluded; Jesus has died for us on the cross, been resurrected, and will come again. As we journey through Advent, we are not only preparing for his birth, but each day we are also preparing for his coming again. Are we ready? Are we worthy?

When the Pharisees and Sadducees appear, John greets them with judgement and haste, referring to them as a “brood of vipers”. This was by no means a compliment; vipers are highly poisonous snakes. He uses that phrase again in Matthew 12:34 when referring to people who “speak good things, when [they] are evil. In Luke’s account of this event, he made a general reference to “crowds”, whereas Matthew was intentional to make specific reference to the Pharisees and Sadducees; even though John was addressing the crowds, the message was likely directed to them.

John continues with, *“Bear fruit worthy of repentance”*. As if to say, “where is the proof of your repentance? Where is the proof that you are worthy? Why have you even come?” *Some may translate “bear fruit worthy of repentance”, to “do good deeds”*. However, it is more than that.

“The character and ways of persons, like trees and their fruits, ought to be consistent -- and consistently good.” Martin Luther said, “Good works do not make a [person] good, but a good [person] does good works.

We must not just do good deeds, or say good things, but rather be consistently good people, down to our core.

John doesn’t even give them a chance to reply, because he knew they had no intention of repenting. He knew they would claim that their ancestry gives them a “get out of jail free card”. So before they even get a chance to respond, he continues:

“Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

Some may feel they have “presumed privilege”; just because you have been coming to Church every Sunday for your entire life does not make you ready and worthy. We should not presume we are more worthy than the people who walk through our doors for the first time. Just as the physical descent from Abraham did not by default make them ready and worthy, neither does the fact that we attend worship on a regular basis. We are worthy if we are truly good people, not just people who occasionally do good acts. So you might attend church on Sunday, however what you do the rest of the week is perhaps ever so more important.

In some ways, John the Baptist in this Gospel reminds me of my father when I was growing up. I don’t think he ever referred to my brother and me as poisonous snakes, however his aggressive approach, judgemental voice, and peculiar appearance at times does tend to lend its similarities. And, like my father, and perhaps yours as well, his intentions were to ensure we were prepared for what was to come. To make sure we were ready and worthy.

Imagine John was able to travel through time and be a guest preacher at Grace Church during Advent. How do you think he would be received, wearing *clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey*, addressing us as a “brood of vipers”, and demanding of us to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Not a very welcoming visual and hopeful message to be greeted with.

Say anything about repentance and it feels like you’re scolding people for not *properly* observing Advent and Christmas; scolding them for spending all their time on superficial things and ignoring the things that truly matter. Repentance not easy for people to digest as it is regularly associated with feelings of guilt, of

not doing enough or not measuring up. So, how could we approach this differently so that people are able to receive this message in a positive light?

David Lose, author and preacher in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, reflects by saying:

“Advent can be a time to put things in perspective, to channel our energy and resources to those things that matter most ... to us, to our families and communities, and to God. Repentance, after all, isn’t about feeling bad or saying, “I’m sorry.” Rather, it’s about a re-orientation, a change of perspective and direction, a commitment to turn and live differently. What if, instead of asking people to have less of their traditional preparations and celebration, we invited them to have more -- more peace, more joy, more grace, more ... Christmas? What if, that is, we invited them to dream bigger dreams and hope grander hopes?”

Hope grander hopes. Hope is the theme found throughout the lessons from Isaiah and Paul’s letter to the Romans. It is this hope we need to focus on at Christmas. The reading from Romans ends with *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”*. What a warm, feel-good verse of scripture. Quite a contrast to *“you brood of vipers...bear fruit of repentance”*. And then Isaiah 11:16 *“the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”* What beautiful imagery!

During Advent and Christmas, we may see new faces enter our doors here at Grace, or perhaps old faces return, searching for a new or renewed relationship with Christ and to be present for his birth this Christmas.

To convey the message of repentance, and manage to focus on the theme hope, we need to take a different approach than John the Baptist did. The language, tone and approach that John used to convey his message, and that our parents may have used with us when we had done wrong fit their contexts. However, the language, tone and approach we use to convey the same message that John the Baptist conveyed, to new people entering our doors, must take a different form. We need to take a welcoming and hospitable approach.

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

Theology professor Valerie Nicolet-Anderson explores the theme of hospitality:

“Christ-believers have to embody an ethics of hospitality towards each other” (Romans 15:7). At the heart of the identity of the community, there needs to be an attitude of welcome and openness.

This hospitality is not a lukewarm sort of welcome that would translate in letting anyone come in as long as they adapt to what is considered the “strong” position in the church (Romans 15:1), conform to the customs of the established church, or follow the agenda established by the ones in charge inside the community.

Rather, the welcome Paul has in mind threatens the ones who offer it. It pushes them to the threshold of the community and forces them to accept those who come as they are, without seeking to first transform them so that they adapt to the dominant practice. The criterion is the ethos of Christ, and this criterion is one that does not seek to change those who come to Christ.”

When people come through our doors, and when we meet people out in the community, we must remember to meet them where they are. We must not judge as John judged the Pharisees and Sadducees. As resonated from the reading from Isaiah, we are all equals and need to live with each other in harmony. We as a church are called to hospitality, and should strive to make all feel welcome, even if it challenges us. “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

It is clearly evident there is a lot to do to prepare during Advent, on our journey to the birth of Christ. But with God’s help, we will be ready and worthy. Let us pray:

Lord, help us prepare.

As we continue on our journey, help us to be ready and to be worthy.

Let us be mindful of what is truly important this season.

Let us hope grandeur hopes and let us be joyful as we anticipate what is to come.

Give us strength not to judge others.

And help us to be welcoming and hospitable to those who enter our doors, and

who we meet in our communities,

that they may feel as equals, worthy to join us on this journey.

Amen.