

Second Sunday in Advent
December 6, 2009
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'" (NIV)

The police officer rang the doorbell. It was 3AM. He had tried to call the family, but only got the answering machine. He rang the door bell because he needed to talk to them. They answered the door, and before he could explain why he was there, he could see the look of horror in their eyes. They were simply not prepared for the awful possibilities that his early morning presence suggested.

He tried to explain as quickly as he could. "Your daughter," he began. "Oh no!" the mother cried out. The officer tried again. "Your daughter had been in a serious car accident." "Dear God, no!" the father moaned. The officer jumped in again as quickly as he could. "But she's all right. We offered to take her home, but she's pretty shaky and wanted you to come and get her." At the voice of this police officer who was the designated messenger, these parents experienced ultimate horror and overwhelming joy. It was a voice and message they never forgot as their relationship with their daughter changed that night. They cherished each other and expressed their love for one another more often. One might say they lived very differently from that night on.

Dear friends, we too have been given a messenger. We have a message that takes us to the extremes as well - a message that brings us very low and then takes us to an ultimate high. This message prepares us and gets us ready not just for Christmas but for Christ. My prayer today is that we listen as: **A voice still cries out!**

As we do every advent season we run into a familiar character, the forerunner of Jesus, whom we know as John the Baptist. I won't get into all the details, but John the Baptist was an interesting guy. Open up your Gospels this week and read some of the details of the personality and lifestyle of this man.

Luke here is very specific in giving us the exact time John the Baptist began his ministry. He writes: "*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.*" Tiberius succeeded Caesar Augustus who died in 14A.D., so the fifteenth year of his reign would put us at either 28-29A.D. when this takes place. We are also given the names of some other political leaders and the spiritual leaders at this time. Without getting into a history lesson on all these people, perhaps it

would be good to note once again that the Bible is not made up of fairy tales or fables or man-made stories. This is history. These are actual places, people, and events. In fact, when it comes to God as it has been said before all history is really HIStory.

At this time we read: ***“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.”*** John the Baptist simply did what all the prophets did. He spoke the Word that came to him. He spoke God’s word. He did God’s work. And God had a special role for John the Baptist. This role had been spoken about by the prophets. Isaiah said there would be one to prepare the way. A King was coming. The roads needed to be made smooth. Preparation was necessary, for the Lord was on His way.

So what was the work of this prophet called John the Baptist? He was simply a voice. He was a voice that cried out to the people. He was the voice of God. He spoke God’s message - the message that God uses to prepare and change hearts forever. This message was not always a pleasant one. Sometimes some heavy equipment is needed to make the roads smooth. Next week we will read more of John’s words that follow, but John spoke of coming judgment. He talked of sin and the need for people to repent. He told people plainly that they had to have a change of heart and mind about who they were and what they had done. He called a spade a spade. He didn’t tell people all the things they wanted to hear but spoke the truth of God’s law which crushed and condemned people in their sins.

We still need that voice to cry out, don’t we? I was surprised to hear that the word “transgression” was the most googled word the other day. While I know it was because the iconic golfer Tiger Woods used this word in his statement talking about his transgressions, I still can’t believe how many people don’t even know what that word transgression means. God has made the line very clear in His Word and every time we step across it we transgress against Him. We sin. Just the very fact people don’t even know the word transgression tells me that we are in need of more John the Baptists - more voices that speak the truth about God’s law and the consequences of our transgressions.

I could get up here every week and try my best to tell you things that will make you feel nice and try to tell you how you are all really good people. I could speak about how you deserve God’s love and favor. But if that is all I did I would not be telling you the truth - I would not be a voice of God. For the truth is I have seen something far different in myself, and in my household, and in the lives of the people that I love here. I have seen selfishness and apathy. I have witnessed pride and greed and envy. I have heard lies and seen transgressions. I see sinners who deserve hell. That’s what I am. That is what all of you are as well. That’s what John the Baptist’s voice still cries out for God today. We need to repent - to see our sins - to turn away from them - to have a change of heart and mind regarding sin. We need to turn to the One who can save us from them.

This is the work of God - the work that God the Holy Spirit does through the voice that still cries out. For this voice also speaks the good news. Did you notice what

work God also gave to John, the work for which he gets his name? He went around baptizing. This baptism was different from ours today in the respect it looked ahead to the coming Savior while our baptisms point back to Jesus and His saving work. However, the blessing offered was still the same. The original Greek makes it very clear John baptized the people ***“for the forgiveness of sins.”*** The awesome gift of forgiveness is actually given in baptism. With simple water and His Word, the Lord washes sin away.

The joyful part of John the Baptist’s ministry was telling people there was a solution for their sins - one and only solution. All people would soon see it. ***“And all mankind will see God's salvation.”*** All would see this salvation because among them was the one called Immanuel which means *“God with us.”* Salvation for the world was at hand because God came as one of us to live among us. The Lamb of God who takes the worlds sin away had arrived. Jesus would soon be healing and teaching and turning away no one. He had arrived for all the world to see. All will see God’s salvation because Jesus would be lifted up on a tree. He was cursed on a cross because of sin - our sin. Jesus paid sin’s price and God’s sinless Son tasted death. He died to bring life to all. This was not hid from anyone and neither was the fact that on the third day Jesus rose again.

All mankind is able to see God’s salvation because Jesus came into our world and brought salvation for all. This time of year is always a good reminder of this for me. The whole world practically stops for a while to honor the birth of this Savior - whether they recognize Jesus or not. Turn on any radio station with Christmas music and you can hear the good news of salvation for all. Whether it is: *“Oh come, Oh come, Immanuel”* or *“O Holy Night,”* the message is there for all to hear. ***“And all mankind will see God's salvation.”*** John the Baptist’s voice shared the good news for every sinner. He constantly pointed to Jesus as the Savior and proclaimed every heart that is turned to Jesus in faith will be saved.

We need this voice to still cry out today, don’t we? This is good news for all people to hear - forgiveness in Jesus is an awesome gift with no strings attached! Jesus is the perfect Christmas gift all people need. Jesus gives sinners life and hope and salvation. Jesus shows us how much God really loves us. Try to think of a person who can use good news like this over the holidays - to hear they are loved by Jesus, even if all others forsake them.

May this voice still cry out today. May our voices join John the Baptists. For God’s message still needs to clearly ring out to the world. A voice still cries out - ***“repent - prepare the way for the Lord - forgiveness for all - salvation for all mankind.”*** This voice that still cries out may make us feel pretty low as it tells the truth about us and our sin, but there is nothing like the ultimate high when it cries out the truth about a Savior - for you and me. Jesus has come and is coming. I pray after hearing His voice our lives are never the same. Amen.