

“CHRISTMAS LIST: I – HOPE”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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1st Sunday of Advent

Last Sunday, a pastor from somewhere just outside of Salt Lake City did something incredible. He wanted to make a point to his congregation, so unbeknownst to them, he worked with a make-up artist, and disguised himself as a homeless person. The pictures I saw on the internet of his transformation were incredible. He went from a clean-shaven, clean-cut looking man, to a disheveled, unruly looking guy.

Then, before the services started for the morning, he stood out in front of the church with his hands out looking for help. What happened was pretty interesting. He said some people came over and gave him change, others slipped him a dollar or two, someone gave him a pack of crackers, and the children – he says that he could tell the children wanted to help.

But what really struck him was the massive indifference most people had for him – they just simply ignored him – pretended like they didn’t see him, and walked right on into the church.

You know what, folks? When I saw the picture of him in disguise, the first person I thought of was John the Baptist – no doubt because I was up to my eyeballs in preparing this sermon about him for the first Sunday of Advent. I looked at that pastor’s picture and thought – that’s what John the Baptist looked like. Disheveled, unruly – the scriptures tell us that he wore a furry garment (clothing of camel’s hair with a belt around his waist) and that he had an interesting diet – locusts and wild honey.

I’ll bet there were a lot of people in John’s day who would have just as soon ignore him, pretended like they didn’t see him, walked by and gone on with their day. But that wasn’t about to happen, because, unlike that pastor, John was anything but a silent presence. John was preaching to beat the band – and it was hellfire and brimstone!

“Prepare the way of the Lord!” he shouted. Later on, he called some, actually the religious folk – he called them “you brood of vipers!” You see what I mean, he was no shrinking violet. He had a message to deliver from God, and by God, he delivered it with passion and conviction, not caring a whit who he made squirm, or who he made mad.

It's an interesting passage for the first Sunday of the season of Advent, isn't it? This season that we all love – the season of stories and songs, the season of hearing again about a dear young woman called to a special mission, the carpenter called with her, their journey to Bethlehem where they found no room, then the birth of the Child born in a manger. It's such a lovely season – it's hard to believe that it starts with hellfire and brimstone!

Yet, maybe it's not so hard to believe. Think about it – that pastor in Salt Lake City had to do something drastic to get his parishioners to loosen up their hardened hearts toward those less fortunate, to see how indifferent they were. So too did John the Baptist have to do something drastic – even call people names – to get them to sit up and take notice. And maybe, just maybe, we need to hear this message too, because we too get so easily distracted and consumed by the activities of our lives, and particularly the activities of the Christmas season.

You've heard it said over and over again about Christmas – Jesus is the reason for the season – yet too easily we forget that, and it becomes more about gifts and parties and cards and activities. John's message today calls us to make Christmas personal this year – to make it a spiritual time in our lives, a time to repent, and prepare the way for the Lord.

Don't let John's yelling and extreme language fool you, however, for what John says and does, he says and does out of love, just like that pastor in Salt Lake. John cares about the people, and he wants them to get their spiritual houses in order, that they might welcome the Christ Child fully and openly, and receive the gifts He comes to bring.

One pastor put it this way, "Repentance is part of the Christian journey, and it's part of getting ready for Christmas. God is coming and all of us probably need some light shed on our darkness." (On-line, "Let Us Have It," Rev. Bradley Schmeling)

That's what John was saying to his listeners that day, and to us this day. Make your heart ready for Jesus. Prepare Him room. Come to the stable with confession, lay your life before the Lord, for as you do you prepare the way for Him to enter.

Another pastor said it well – "Make room for Christ (that is essentially John's message). And in making room, we just might discover the truth that the peace and joy God wants to give to us does not come from the stuff of Christmas but from the simplicity of Christ . . . Advent calls us to look deeply into our hearts and clear the way for the rule and reign of the Lord." (On-line, lectionarysermons.com, "The Arrival – Change: The Kingdom in Near")

So, you see, John's message is a message of love, however harsh it seems. But it's also something else – it's a message of hope. Because the story is not all about us, and getting ourselves right – the story is about the hope of the One who is to come, who will make things right – Jesus the Christ!

John is there to point the way to Jesus – plain and simple. He says that at the end of the passage – “it’s not about me, it’s about Him, the One whose sandals I am unworthy to even carry.”

John points the way to Jesus and lets people know that because of Him they can really and truly open up about who they are and what they have done or haven’t done; because their story doesn’t end there, it ends with Jesus. And He will make all things right.

That makes all the difference in the world, doesn’t it? If we can trust that our lives can be redeemed, no matter what kind of mess we might have made of them, there is always hope, isn’t there? And we can trust that, because of the baby born in the manger of Bethlehem.

You know, I think John the Baptist looked around the world of his day with a bit of disgust – I mean, why else would he call the people “a brood vipers.” And I think that pastor out west looked around and saw how easily people turn away from each other. And you and I know that the times in which we live are challenging, at the very least - that there are problems of every shape and size, and at times the challenges of our day seem overwhelming – and perhaps even the challenges of our own lives seem that way too.

Yet, the message of John the Baptist and Advent is that there is hope – there is always hope – because of Jesus. So John says, “do what you need to do to prepare your heart for the ‘Bringer of Hope’ to enter in this Christmas. Make this Advent journey personal. Pray, reflect, and yes, remember the reason for the season.

And remember this – no matter how desperate your situation, no matter how desperate the situation around you – there is always hope.

So I want to close with a wonderful story of hope – that I learned of just recently, and maybe some of you did as well, by way of a segment on 60 Minutes a few weeks ago.

It was a story from Paraguay, actually from the slums of Paraguay, where poverty is at a desperate level. A man named Juan Manuel Chavez, who is a musician, brought a youth orchestra from a neighboring town to play in his hometown of Cateura, this place of desperate poverty. He wanted to inspire children about music, but he admitted that “Cateura is not a place to have a violin. In fact (he said), a violin is worth more than a house here.”

But after seeing how excited children were about the orchestra, Chavez and a friend came up with an absolutely wild idea. They would try to fashion musical instruments out of trash they found in the local dump. Really and truly!

So they began to collect things – like empty oil cans, old lunch trays, old water pipes, buttons, bottle caps, spoons and forks, pieces of wood. And they fashioned musical instruments out of the “junk.” Honest to goodness musical instruments! If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it.

And once they put the instruments together, Chavez began to teach the children, until now they have about 20 kids, from ages 11 to 19, in this orchestra. They play classical music, but also some local folk music, and they put on concerts.

Their story has taken on a life of its own, and so now, they’re being invited to play all over the world – in what has been dubbed “The Landfill Harmonic Orchestra.”

It’s an unbelievable story. Beautiful, beautiful music is being played by these precious young people on instruments made of tossed away stuff.

Oh my, if that’s not a metaphor for what God can do with our lives! If such beautiful music can come from tossed away stuff, how much more can the Lord do with our lives. Nothing is impossible with Him! Hope does spring eternal.

So, my friends, I invite you this Advent to hear and heed the call of John the Baptist. “Repent; prepare the way of the Lord. Let your heart prepare Him room, that He may enter in and make you whole.” May it be so.

Amen.