

“IT’S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS!”

I – BELLS

Karen F. Bunnell

Elkton United Methodist Church

December 1, 2019

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Matthew 3:1-12

The other day, right in the middle of a funeral service I was conducting, somebody’s phone went off, and it wasn’t one of those quiet rings, it was actually an old-fashioned bell ringing sound. And it didn’t just go off once, it kept ringing and ringing, even while I was trying to talk. Everyone was distracted, and people were rolling their eyes, looking around for the guilty party. (I think the person actually thought it would stop ringing, but it took a while.)

Well, it proved something that I want to point out to you today – bells get our attention! Their ringing and tingling break through the ordinary sounds of our lives and our world and we sit up and take notice when we hear them.

Sometimes the ringing is not good – as in the case of the phone ringing during a funeral. But sometimes, many more times actually, bells ringing are good. Think of church bells ringing out to call people to worship. Or think of the times

you may have been in the neighborhood and heard our carillon ringing music into the air. Bells call you out of your routine, they get your attention.

There are some bells that we always hear at this time of year especially. They're the bells rung by those manning the Salvation Army kettles in front of stores or in malls. Those bells ring out to say, "Hey, there are people who need your help. Can you open up your heart during this Christmas season and give to those who don't have enough?"

Bells. Beautiful instruments that ring out, break through the routine and get our attention.

There's a reason I chose bells as the first symbol of Christmas to talk about today – because they do call us to attention – and the season of Advent is all about paying attention. There's a bell ringer, if you will, this first Sunday of Advent, and his name is John the Baptist. You heard about him in the Gospel lesson.

John the Baptist is calling people to attention, to sit up and take notice and get ready for the One who is to come. He is pointing the way to Jesus, and calling people to be prepared for him. In that day and time, he was literally calling the people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. In our day and time, he is calling us to prepare to remember Jesus' birth, yes, but he is also calling us to prepare for the day when Christ comes again. Even though we do not know the day or hour, John calls us to be prepared.

And how does he tell us to do that? By repenting. What does that mean? Well, many would say that repenting is saying sorry for something you've done, but it's way more than that. Repenting is actually reorienting your life, turning around, making changes, choosing another course.

John is calling us to ask ourselves, "Is my life a reflection of life the way God means it to be? Is my life a reflection of the life God sent Jesus to bring to the world – abundant life?"

Oh, that's a whole lot more than just saying "sorry" for sins we have committed, wrongs we have done. It's taking a look at our lives and asking what

keeps them from being abundant, in line with God's intentions for the world. And then, having answered that question, making changes.

If you had to answer the question today, "What keeps my life from being abundant? What am I doing that does not line up with God's intentions for the world?" - how would you answer? Might you say it was worrying over things too much? Or maybe it's stressing over trying to be perfect or do everything perfectly? Maybe what's keeping you from an abundant life is an unhealthy relationship with someone else. Or maybe it's being caught under the burden of too many possessions, or trying to get more possessions.

I could go on and on, but only you know the answer for your life. What would you have to give up or change to know life in abundance, the life Jesus came to give you? What would you have to give up or change to bring your life more into alignment with God's intentions for the world? Whatever it is, John the Baptist calls out, saying, "Now is the time. Now is the time to change your life, to be able to open your heart more fully to the coming of Christ, to be ready."

This call to repentance is, in some ways, so different from the call to repentance in Lent. Lent is more somber and sacrificial, where the season of Advent is a time of hope. Actually that's the word for today in the Advent wreath – hope. In this season of hope, John invites us to live as hopeful and hope-filled people. Actually, to repent means that we trust and hope in a better future, we trust and hope in a future shaped by God in Christ Jesus, and we want to be a part of it.

The question for all of us is, will we hear the Advent bells ringing out in the voice of John the Baptist, and repent? Will we have the courage to stop for a while, and take the time to think about what needs to change in our lives to live abundantly, and to live in such a way that they reflect the God in whom we believe? I hope we will, because abundant life is what God wants for us, what he sent Jesus to give us.

You know, while I was preparing this sermon, I was thinking about these questions for my own life. I won't tell you everything I was thinking, but I will tell you that one of the things that keeps me from the abundant life that God wants for me is stressing over getting everything done that I need to do. I know that stress keeps me from experiencing abundance.

But let me tell you what happened. While I was pondering that, and praying about how I could change that, I decided just to be still for a while, not to tackle anything on my “to do” list, not to consult my calendar and see everything that lies ahead, just to be still. And when I was still, some of that abundance came rolling in. For you see, I always have music playing in the background when I’m working – usually a classical music station from London – Classic FM. I confess that most often it’s background music, but in that sacred moment when I listened to John’s call to repent, and I was still, suddenly I heard, really heard the music, and what came on in those moments, amazingly, were two of my all-time favorite pieces of music – The Overture of Wagner’s Tannhauser, and “Intermezzo” from Cavalleria Rusticana. Absolutely, positively exquisite pieces of music that always stir my heart, and had I not been being intentionally still, intent on repenting and changing, I might never have really heard them – and would have missed a moment of abundance. And friends, God provides those moments all the time if we would only stop and see and hear them.

Oh friends, what are we missing in life, and how much more full and abundant could life be if we chose to intentionally line ourselves up with God’s will for our lives and the life of the world. John invites us to take a look this Advent season, not just to be better people, but to draw closer to the One who came and who

will come again, to know life in all its abundance, and to be a part of bringing the kingdom in all its fullness into reality.

So I invite you to pray about how you will repent this Advent season.

Maybe you can commit to taking some intentional quiet time every day during Advent, to talk to God, to listen to him, to notice things you never notice – and in so doing, perhaps you will experience the peace Christ came to give.

Or maybe you can decide to stop holding a grudge against a person that hurt you, or decide to forgive someone who wronged you, and as you do, you will have a part in God's vision of the day when "the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and there will be peace."

Or maybe you can really think about your spending this Christmas season, and vow to spend some of your money giving to people who are in need, answering Jesus' call to "feed the hungry and clothe the naked."

Perhaps you can decide that, during Advent, you will seek to live in peace as much as possible – whether that means being kind to other drivers, holding doors open for people, treating people who serve you (like store cashiers) with patience and kindness, or deciding not to fight over politics or other divisive issues. What amazing things those choices would do to those around you!

Dear friends, as we enter this Advent season, let us, as one pastor put it, “lean into hope” – hope for the world through the coming of Jesus, hope for a future that Christ will bring to completion when he comes again, and hope for ourselves that we will have the courage to repent and change our lives in such a way that we will point others to the kingdom, and most of all – to the King! May it be so.

Amen.