

Sermon 12-12-10 “John Asks the Right Questions”

Well, good morning! Before we get carried away with our Christmas planning it might be a good idea to pay some brief attention to John the Baptist who asks the right questions about this holiday season.

But first a word from the comic strip “Tiger” a few years ago. Two little boys were talking about Christmas. One reports “we got an artificial tree this year.” The other said, “Doesn’t that bother you?” The first boy replies, “No, not as long as the presents are real!”

There’s a lot of artificial stuff that has built up around our Christmas time of the year, and my hope on this third Sunday of our Advent get-ready time, is to help all of us separate what’s real and matters, from the artificial stuff.

I realize it’s not easy to keep a handle on reality in this pre-Christmas season. We may be like the woman in the shopping mall who was dashing through the stops on her Christmas shopping list and spilled her armload of Christmas packages and then cried out, “Oh, I hate Christmas anyhow! It just turns everything upside down!”

Maybe it’s good for our ordinary way of thinking to be shaken up so we will separate what’s artificial from what’s real. It’s hard to get use to all the rapid pace of change anyway, so there is in all of us the unease of wanting to have something to hold on to. That’s why I suggest this morning that we hearken to John the Baptist’s words, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.” Like it was for Dorothy in the “Wizard of Oz”, we have to “stay on the yellow brick road.”

And it's not the decorations or the parties or the present=shopping that gets us off the road. A friend of mine going back 60 years has time on his hands and thinks he is helping me prepare for preaching by calling to ask "if the shepherds heard from the angels on that Christmas night and went to Bethlehem to find Jesus—what happened to their sheep?"

I had to tell him that he was getting me off the track with a question like that, just as I am if I wonder too long why the Gospels of Mark and John have no Bethlehem narratives at all, or if I spend too long pondering the marriage customs of that time and what do we really know about Mary? And, by the way, who were the Magi, the three Wise Men?

Here at St. James' on Christmas Eve the Children's' Pageant and the services will be radiant from the beautiful hymns and familiar words, but none of it gets to the real point unless it beckons you to consider the question: How do you experience, really experience God being born into Your life?

In the Gospel passage this morning, John, this remarkable hinge-person between the Old Testament Hebrew people and the New Testament birth of Jesus, asks from his prison cell "are you the one who is to come, or do we wait for another?" and Jesus sends back his reply "Go and tell John what is happening. What do you see in yourself and in the world? What are you now able to hear? Part of you was blind, now can you see? part of you was lame, now can you walk? Part of you was dead inside, now can you feel new life?"

What Jesus was pointing toward was beyond a history lesson of instruction, information, and teaching about the Messiah. They had had all that. What Jesus was pointing to was a relationship between himself and God and between his followers and himself. Reading and studying, or even acting and singing about the birth and life of Jesus as a figure in history is wonderful to do, but it is not sufficient to discover his reality deep in your heart, where he must live if he is really to live for us at all.

This Sunday, now less than two weeks away from Christmas, it's good that we have prayed the Collect for Third Advent as we began this service: "Stir up your Power, O Lord, and come among us." If we are to build the relationship I speak of this morning, that power is what we need in every season—and maybe even more so in these mixed-up days before Christmas. The bright lights of Christmas decorations are not enough to help us deal with all the life-or-death issues that face us not just globally but oftentimes right here at home in our mixed-up personal lives. It's times like these that we need to join John the Baptist by asking, "Jesus, are you the one I need and am waiting for or do I wait for another?"

"Stir up your POWER, O Lord. And come among us." Is this what you're looking for? Jesus—the real Jesus—whose bible story jumps quickly out of the manger onto the center stage of the world's history, and powerfully upsets our expectations? It's time to ask ourselves if we want to follow the living Christ or simply an idea you've dreamed up of who Christ should be.

John the Baptist calls us this Advent to get straight who Jesus has been, and can be now for us. He calls us to a fresh start

with new expectations. If you want a name for that turnaround, it's called "repentance."

Last Sunday I was in New York City to make my annual pilgrimage along Fifth Avenue from the beautifully lighted Rockefeller Center Christmas tree at 50th street and then later to see the awesome contrast of the medieval Christmas tree in the Metropolitan Museum on Fifth Avenue at 82d St. And I marveled again how the many rooms of paintings and sculptures of the Virgin and Child, surrounding that tree, continue to draw out our sense of how the world has been changed, slowly but surely, because of his birth and life.

When I began this sermon I was thinking about the boys in the comic strip talking about the real gifts of Christmas. And now, if YOU too get ready for Christmas by putting the themes from St. John of repentance, power, and expectation on your own spiritual Christmas tree-- I can promise you: the tree will NOT be artificial and the presents WILL be real! AMEN