

Advent 2C

December 6, 2009

Hymns: 16 - 20 - 32 - 21

LUKE 3:1-6

DON'T FACE ANOTHER WINTER WITHOUT CHRISTMAS!

I. Sense Your Messiah Coming.

II. Prepare To Meet Him Through Repentance.

May the God of peace fill you with all joy in believing! Amen.

Dear Advent Worshipers.

I want to give you a memory test. How many of you remember these chilling words? **Slide 1**

“This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. The broadcasters of your area in voluntary cooperation with the FCC and federal, state and local authorities have developed this system to keep you informed in the event of an emergency. If this had been an actual emergency, you would have been instructed to tune to one of the broadcast stations in your area.”

It's been ten years since the Emergency Broadcast System broadcast its last alert. For many years the EBS stood ready to warn us in case the Soviet Union launched a nuclear attack. Today, such concerns seem to have gone the way of fallout shelters and tailfins on automobiles--but people took them very seriously in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. The U.S. government had developed stringent safeguards to see to it that a genuine attack would never be confused with a false alarm or a simple test. To ensure that this would never happen, sealed envelopes containing a set of updated authenticator codes were sent on a regular basis to every broadcast facility in the United States.

Despite these safeguards, however, the unthinkable happened. At 9:33 AM EST on February 20, 1971 the Emergency Broadcast System was inadvertently activated. The signal for a real attack was mistakenly given. The wire services picked up the bulletin and distributed those chilling words, “This is not a test.” What do you suppose was the response to this inadvertent activation? It was disturbing, to say the least. The majority of the U.S. radio stations that received the bulletin either chose to ignore it, or figured, correctly, that it was a mistake. Even when a second message went out with a special codeword embedded in it signifying that it was not a test but an authentic emergency, still broadcasters ignored it. Only one broadcast station, a television station in Chicago, shut down as required by federal law. Obviously, this false alarm demonstrated major flaws in this system.

Slide 2 I thought of the Emergency Broadcast System when I thought of the role of John the Baptist in the Advent drama. John was assigned by God the task of alerting the people of Israel that the Messiah was on His way. Some listened and some did not. We think of John the Baptist as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. How appropriate such a view is for this second Sunday of Advent--for without Christ the world is indeed a wilderness. Without Christ, the world is a prisoner-of-war-camp and we are enslaved by the power of sin. Without Christ, this is a cold, dark meaningless world.

In the second chapter of C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, little Lucy stumbles through the back of a wardrobe into the imaginary country of Narnia. Although it's summer in England (where the wardrobe sits), it's winter in Narnia. Shivering in the cold, Lucy soon meets a faun, Mr. Tumnus, who tells her what wintertime is like in Narnia. The wintertime is perpetual, says Mr. Tumnus, and is the result of someone called the White Witch. “It's she who makes it always winter (here),” Tumnus says, “Always winter and never Christmas; think of that!” Maybe it isn't always winter in Minnesota. It just feels that way from the first of December, until some time in April! Would you want to face another long Minnesota winter without Christmas?! I hope not! Neither would I! Then let us learn from John the Baptist!

Is it not an accurate description of a world without Christ?: “Always winter and never Christmas . . .” John's message was a word of warning, but ultimately it was a word of hope. Repent . . . our salvation is at hand. John's task was to prepare the world for the coming of the Christ. Today we read his words with joy as we

prepare our hearts for the Christmas season and all it means to our faith. John's message was simple..... **The Messiah is coming!** That was the heart of his message. *One is coming after me Who was before me. One is coming Whose sandals I am not worthy to latch.*

One of the humorous characteristics of the last presidential campaign was the almost fervent messianic expectations that some of Barack Obama's supporters had about him. John McCain made jokes about it, and about his own lack of charisma. At a dinner for politicians and journalists in Manhattan, McCain declared, "Maverick I can do, but Messiah is above my pay grade."

Obama also poked fun at the idea. "Contrary to the rumors you may have heard," Obama said, "I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father, Jor-El, to save the planet Earth." Well, the President obviously is not the Messiah or even Superman. Whenever life gets difficult, people pray for a leader who will lead the world out of darkness into light. Israel had been looking for several hundred years for such a leader. They were under Rome's steel hand. They were looking for a deliverer. John the Baptist announced that the coming of the Messiah was at hand. Whenever life gets difficult we look for someone to deliver us.

Many of you are familiar with the 1957 motion picture *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* starring Alec Guinness. It was selected as one of the 100 great films of the 20th century. It is the story of a group of British prisoners of war during World War II held by the Japanese in northern Burma in very difficult circumstances. Ernest Gordon, at one time chaplain at Yale University, wrote a book in which he shared his experience as a prisoner in that camp. **(slide 3)** It is a story of utter degradation and desolation.

Gordon said the most spiritual moment of that experience was Christmas 1944. Out of deference to the holiday, the men were not given work detail that day and were given a bit more food. He said that as they moved around the prison yard, they sensed that things were somehow different. In one of the barracks (basically a thatched hut with a dirt floor and open sides where the men slept), one soldier began to sing a Christmas carol. It was echoed over the infirmary where men were dying. Then all around the camp, the men began to sing, and those who could, those who were ambulatory, came to the parade field and sat there in a great circle. Gordon said, "God touched us that day." He called it the most sacred event that he had ever been involved with. No preaching, nothing of the usual church paraphernalia, just men united by their common misery, singing of God being with them – "Immanuel!" And he said, "We were touched by God."

In a sense, those soldiers experienced the coming of the Messiah to their prisoner of war camp there in Burma. They experienced a momentary shining of light into their darkness. Maybe you have experienced that some Christmas when you were having a difficult time in your life. You had gotten to a point where you were about to give up, but suddenly you felt the touch of God in the same way those soldiers experienced God's touch. That is part of what Christmas is all about. It's not really about glitter and expensive gifts. It's about people in all kinds of circumstances experiencing God's presence. My prayer for you is that in this Christmas season you will be touched by the Christ Child through a choir anthem or a Christmas hymn, perhaps an Advent Meditation or a sermon. John's message, first of all, is a message of hope. The Messiah is coming! May that message make your Minnesota winter shorter!

John's second message is prepare the way. In the words of Isaiah, he was the "voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" Now how do you prepare for the coming of the Messiah? You do so first and foremost by repenting. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Beginning with the seventh verse of this same chapter John speaks very explicitly about ways people are to prepare. The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors were told not to collect any more than they are required to. Soldiers are told not to extort money and not to falsely accuse people. People needed to prepare their hearts and their lives to receive the Messiah through repentance and amendment of life, for His was not a kingdom of the flesh, but of the spirit.

(slide 4) A West Virginia state trooper once stopped a woman for going 15 miles an hour over the speed limit. After he handed her a ticket, she asked him, "Don't you give out warnings?" "Yes, ma'am," he replied.

“They’re all up and down the road. They say, ‘Speed Limit 55.’” You and I have a tendency to disregard the warning signs, don’t we?--sometimes with dire consequences. We need to repent and change our ways!

An organization in Canada is seeking to decrease accidents between cars and trains. Most of the blame for the fatalities is on drivers who are risk-takers. Studies have shown that when people hear a train whistle, their minds tell them to accelerate their speed. About 43 percent of the accidents involving cars and trains occur at crossings equipped with flashing lights and bells or gates. Many drivers have the audacity to drive around or under gates. They take the risk, thinking they can beat the train and somehow miss the collision--but often with tragic consequences!

Could you be deaf sometimes to warning signals? John warned the people of Israel that the Messiah was coming. John wanted the people to repent and be baptized because he wanted them to experience the richness and the joy of that coming. Remember how Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God”? God wants to break into OUR lives and fill us with His love, but without our willingness to repent, God is kept out. It will be a cold day (and winter!) in Minnesota – without repentance. And it can make for a hot time for all eternity for those who refuse to repent!

God seeks to break into our dark, cold winter world with forgiveness. The only way that can happen is through repentance. John’s message was, “The Messiah is coming, prepare the way for Him through baptism and repentance.” **Slide 5 When we’ve repented and been baptized, we will be ready for God’s salvation.** *“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.’”*

Salvation is what the Christmas story is all about. God enters the manger of Bethlehem in order to save a world of sinners from the winter of their wickedness. When we receive that grace, that peace, that love--then even in the midst of a Minnesota winter, we can experience the blessing of a true Christmas! This Advent season we need to reflect on the entire Christ event. Christ came into the world to save us from the power of sin. The Messiah is coming. Repent and be baptized. Then you will surely see God’s salvation – and a much shorter winter! Amen.

May the God of forgiving peace fill you with pure Christmas joy in believing. Amen.