

Sermon 2023 12 17 Text

The name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Companion on the Journey. Amen.

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Would you imagine this scene with me. You and a friend are walking along, near the edge of the desert. It is what passes for a nice day in turn of the calendar Israel.

The temperature is quite high, but actually not significantly hotter than what we experience here. It is the lack of moisture, the lack of vegetation, and the fact that you do not have a fan or air-conditioning that makes it really hot.

You are chatting – telling stories of families – laughing at each other's stories – rejoicing in each other's company.

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Then a man walks out in front of you. His hair and beard are a tangled mess and you can see small, uneaten parts of locust and wild honey amidst the matting of the beard.

His clothing consists almost entirely of a camel's hair coat which, quite frankly has seen better days. And as he walks toward you, the slight wind blows dust and fine sand from the coat.

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The man stops in front of you and says two things. First, "Prepare the way." And then, "Repent."

Having finished his task he leaves you and wanders off towards a group of people standing over in the distance. You see him stop with them, repeat the same phrases and move on again.

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Later, in the cooling shade of your destination, you ponder his words.

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Back in our own time, in our season of Advent, we recognise that the appearance and ministry of John the Baptist is a key element in our own preparation for the coming of a saviour.

Some people spend this time cooking, and shopping, and wrapping. It becomes a highly stressful time as we organise family and friends for visits, attach reindeer horns to our car, try to fit in as many parties as possible.

Within the Church we have extra services and try to keep our minds focussed on the coming Christ Child, and not just ensuring that the services and other activities go well.

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Within our hearts and motivating our actions we need to hold two verses that come from our reading today:

From John 1.7-8:

7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

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One quality that was necessarily found in John was modesty or humility.

It was necessary for John to be in front of people – sometimes massive crowds – to proclaim the coming of the promised one.

This is not as easy as it sounds. When we stand in front of a few or many to speak about a great truth, we must have the capacity to speak credibly and powerfully. And some people are quite generous in their response to what you have said.

But we are, in one sense loudspeakers, through which a great truth is broadcast. The words originate in God and we are devices, hard wired into God, to broadcast the sounds that have their origins in that greatest of beings.

And, as with all loudspeakers, sometimes the sounds flow through with perfect clarity. Other loudspeakers have that cheap, tinny sound with distracting static.

We need to hold perfect clarity, but remember that the sound that flows through us, like John, originates in another place.

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The other great quality of John was a confronting integrity – he believed absolutely in the words that flowed through him and he spoke them to the greatest and to the least.

There was an integrity in John that allowed the message he proclaimed on street corners to be exactly the same message that he proclaimed in great palaces regardless of the possibility of anger or violence.

Again, a message that did not originate in him was allowed to be broadcast through him uncensored and at full strength. There was never a dilution, never a pulling of the punches, never making the words more palatable regardless of the consequences.

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There is just one final thing I want to do with those verses, I want to play with the pronouns to remind us of two important truths.

This is the original version of the text:-

He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

It is a description and an explanation and a summation of the whole of the life of John the Baptist. He spent himself in being a signpost and proclaimer of the light.

Now I want to vary the text to remind us of a greater truth:-

We came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through us. We were not the light, but we came to testify to the light.

This is a reminder of our function as the Church. We do not exist to block out the world. Corporately we must welcome people inside so that they hear our testimony to the light and to see that we are a pointer to a greater plane of existence.

And, as the Church, we do not exist solely within these four walls. We go out confronting great and small to step into the light and face the great truths of our existence as children of God and guardians of a world created by God, for us.

Now I want to vary the text again to remind us that we are created to be exactly like John the Baptist:-

I came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through me. I am not the light, but I came to testify to the light.
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As well as living a corporate reflection of John, we are called to like a personal reflection of him.

Yes we can do without the locusts and wild honey and camel's hair coat. What we cannot do without is having the sound turned down, or worse, turned in any part of our day.

Broadcasting the truth must become an integral part of each day and each hour.

John is dead, but we are alive. Christ is alive. Yes our faith is a corporate experience. But it must also be a personal experience which we must hold in tension and intentionally as we travel through our world.

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Our world has become too loud with the competing sounds of other aspirations; other attempts to state the greatest truth.

For the greatest truth is that Christ comes, born as a baby to buy us back into relationship with God. If we can become comfortable with this, then we will know truth, but more

importantly we will proclaim truth on every occasion –
regardless of the cost.

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