

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA
✠ Second Sunday in Advent ✠
December 10, 2006

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “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.’””

(Luke 3:1-6 NIV)

People have been waiting for Jesus to come for a long time. For almost 1500 years, Christians have used the four weeks before Christmas, called Advent, to wait and prepare for Jesus’ coming. But really, Jesus’ followers have been waiting for him ever since he ascended into heaven and the angels promised that he would return. But this has been going on even longer. Long before the first Christmas, thousands of years before Christ, God’s people waited for the Savior that God promised to Adam and Eve. For nearly all of this world’s history, God’s people have been waiting for Jesus to come – and preparing their hearts to receive him.

But waiting is not the easiest thing to do. Just ask a child how easy it is to wait during these weeks before Christmas. Adults don’t like to wait much, either. Just ask someone who is waiting on hold for the next available representative. Sometimes, if the wait is too long, we’re likely to give up. If I have to wait hours to get a seat in a restaurant, I just might go somewhere else.

For those who are waiting for Jesus – celebrating Advent – God sends a messenger; a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. The prophet Malachi promised this messenger. The prophet Isaiah also spoke about him, and the Evangelist Luke today tells us about him. We’re talking about John the Baptist, whom God called to prepare his way. And we’ll see that what God did through John the Baptist he has also done all along and is continuing to do even in this Advent season – **preparing the way for the Lord in all generations**. God’s messenger prepares the way for the Lord just like an Old Testament prophet, but with a New Testament message.

By the time that John the Baptist came on the scene, it had been 400 years since the last prophet of God. Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament. But it was Malachi who also foretold the coming of another prophet, **“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.”** This messenger was John the Baptist. And even though we read about John in the New Testament, he was very much like an Old Testament prophet.

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

The prophet Isaiah was commissioned the year that king Uzziah died. Jeremiah began his ministry in the thirteenth year of King Josiah, and Zechariah started in the reign of Darius. It seems that Old Testament writers marked time by the king who was in power at the time, so nearly every Old Testament prophet's message begins with words just like these. Each prophet was sent by God to proclaim a message in his own time, for his own day. John was called to preach in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

And at specific time, God called him. Over and over again the Old Testament tells how "the Word of the Lord came" to the prophets before they spoke. And here, **"the Word of God came to John son of Zechariah."** John didn't go to school to become a preacher. He didn't make a career decision when he went into the desert. It was the Lord who came to John and chose John to be his messenger.

And God not only chooses the preacher, and the time, the Lord also chooses the place. Isaiah prophesied that this messenger would proclaim his message in the wilderness. We probably would have sent John to a place where more people were. We maybe would have sent John to Jerusalem. But God sent his messenger John into the wilderness, and had him preach in all the country around the Jordan, just as God had called Old Testament prophets to prophesy in Israel, or Judah, Nineveh or Babylon. God sends his messengers where he needs them.

And he takes care of them there. In the wilderness, God supplied John with a diet of locusts and wild honey. When God called the prophet Elijah, he sent him into the wilderness in the middle of a drought, but sent ravens to feed him.

In many ways, John was just like every other prophet that had ever spoken the Word of the Lord. He was called by God to be his messenger. He was called at God's choice, at God's time, and he worked in the place where God called him to work. John was just like the prophets of generations past – and of generations to come.

God doesn't call his messengers today in exactly the same way that he called them in the past. Now God calls people to service indirectly through his church. But yet these things remain true: God chooses those whom he will have serve. God sends them at just the right time and to just the right place. And he takes care of them there.

God's Old Testament prophets were sent to prepare the people for the Lord's coming in their time. John the Baptist was called to prepare the way for the Lord in his day. They were all preparing God's people for Jesus' coming, and that's exactly what we are doing to this day. As we await Jesus' coming this Advent season God has also called messengers to you. Instead of serving near the Jordan during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, they serve here, in 2006. Here is where they go about the work that God has called them to do, especially in this Advent season – preparing the way for the Lord.

In all generations God has been sending messengers to proclaim that his coming is near and to prepare people for his coming. In all generations, he has called them, much like Old Testament prophets, but he also calls messengers with a New Testament message. Luke summarizes John's message this way,

"He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

John preached repentance, but there are two parts to repentance – contrition (sorrow over sin) and faith (trust in God who forgives sin). In the Gospel lesson next week, we'll hear John preaching that first part. He's going to have some harsh words for the Jews. He speaks a message of the law that was meant to crush the pride of the Jews and led them to repentance. It rightly

condemned them for being proud and thinking that they could be children of God without it effecting their lives and bearing fruit in those lives. The prophet Isaiah puts it this way, “ **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.**”

The message of the law that John preached leveled sinful pride and confronted crooked sinners. But the goal of John’s preaching was always repentance. It was turning from sin and turning to God who alone can forgive sin. In all of John’s preaching, he was always pointing to Jesus, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And that’s exactly what Jesus does. He accomplished that when he shed his blood on the cross. He gives that forgiveness of sins when he washes us in baptism or speaks to us in his Word and when he feeds us in his Supper.

And very often, he does that through a messenger. He does that through a messenger who preaches repentance. One who confronts you with the real sin that is in your heart and on your lips and on your hands. One who warns you of the dangers of continuing in any sin, no matter how minor it seems. But this messenger also turns you and points you to Jesus. He says, “Look, the lamb of God” Look, and see in him, in his Word, the salvation that God planned from all eternity, that he carried out perfectly, and that he gives freely.

This is God’s message for all time. Ever since the fall into sin God has been working to show us his salvation. Sometimes he used publicly called messengers: prophets, apostles, missionaries, pastors, teachers. Everyone from John the Baptist to your first Sunday School teacher.

But other times he has used other messengers who were not sent to preach to all of Israel or Judah. They weren’t called to wear camel’s hair and a leather belt, and they weren’t called to wear an alb and stole, but they were messengers who with their words prepared the way for the Lord. Perhaps they were the people who brought you to a font somewhere to receive Holy Baptism. Or maybe it was that friend from work who talked you into coming to church. Or maybe it was your fiance or spouse who finally interested you in hearing the message that was so important to him or her.

Or maybe you are the messenger. Maybe it is through your words, or your invitation or your word of concern or forgiveness that you share with another that person is led to repentance. Maybe you are the messenger who by reading a simple Bible story preach a powerful sermon to young hearts. Maybe you are the one who gives of your time or your abilities to make sure that the ministry of the gospel in this congregation reaches everyone here and everyone out there.

In all generations God sends out messengers to prepare the way for the Lord. He calls them, much like he called the prophets. He sends them to speak the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s Advent now, and time to hear that Jesus is coming. So we hear again the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus came into this world to pay for our sins. He comes in Word and Sacrament to strengthen us until he comes again. And he will come again in glory. But while we wait and watch, while we celebrate Advent, because he has sent his messengers to prepare the way, we look forward to that day with joy, and pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Amen.