



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 9, 2007

2nd Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1-12

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 130

Second Lesson: Romans 15:4-13

Gospel: Matthew 3:1-12

Listen to the Way Preparer

Have you ever gone to a concert or seen someone perform where they have a warm-up act? What is the purpose of the warm-up act? You didn't go there to see the warm-up act. Half the time you don't even know who they are or what they are there for or anything about them. Recently we saw a comedian perform and beforehand they had another comedian come out, and he was okay. I guess I wouldn't care a bit if I never heard him again because all he seemed to know how to do was use obscenities. But the point of what he was doing was to get the crowd laughing and get the crowd ready for the other guy to come. It's the same thing if you go to a concert. It's the same thing when the President comes. They have someone come who introduces him and talks about him—prepares the way for him, so to speak.

The Second Sunday of Advent we always look at the one who prepares the way. We look at God's warm-up act I suppose you could say, that John the Baptist was. His express purpose was to be there and get things ready. Not to draw attention to himself, but to point to the One who would come after him, the One whose sandals he was not worthy to carry as he said.

So this morning, we hear God's call to us to listen to the Way Preparer and the Lord reminds us that the Way Preparer that he used was an unusual man with an unusual message all designed to draw attention so that people would be ready when the greater one came.

I don't think you can think of a much more unusual man than John. He didn't live in the cities where the people were. He lived in the desert. If you want to get the crowd ready, you go to the crowd, don't you? But John the Baptist stayed out in the desert and the crowds came to him. Why? Because they heard he was an unusual man with an unusual message, right? He was dressed in a way they weren't used to. What did it say he was wearing? Camel's hair, leather belt around his waist—okay the belt doesn't seem that odd, but camel's hair wasn't the 1st Century Judea rage of fashion. He lived on locusts and wild honey. Try publishing that as your own diet book that you are writing and see how much you make—the Locust and Wild Honey Diet. It's different. It's odd. It's not what the people were used to but it was there for a purpose. He lived out in the desert. He dressed differently. He acted differently, didn't he? When the leaders came out to him, this unique man, when they came out to see what was going on, did John try to kiss up to them a little bit and get them on his side so they would help bring the people to his cause? Well, if you say calling someone "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" is a way of saddling up next to

someone, I guess that is what he was doing. I tend to think he was getting right in their face and telling them they had a problem. These were people that weren't used to hearing that they had a problem. These were people that were used to telling other people they had a problem, like walking too many steps on the Sabbath Day or doing too much work on the Sabbath Day, or "you didn't wash your hands before you ate and didn't ceremonially clean yourself so you aren't quite right with the manmade laws."

John the Baptist cut to the heart of the issue. He cut right to their heart and warned them that their hearts weren't right. He tells them to "produce fruits in keeping with repentance. The axe is already at the tree and every tree that isn't good is going to be cut down and burned up," and he looked them in the eye as he said that.

Dale Carnegie wasn't around in 1st Century Judea, but if he would have been, I don't think he would have used John the Baptist as an example of how to win friends and influence people, right? He seems to be going about it all wrong. But look at how God worked through him. Look at how God used his Way Preparer. How many of those people that went out to the desert went there to see this oddball? How many do you think went out there just to see if what they heard was actually true?—if there is this nutcase living out in the desert doing these things. Then they got out there and they heard him. That message he spoke had to have some power to it, right? That message he spoke had to have the power because these people, many of them, were being baptized. Even though he alienated people, eventually it cost him his head because he alienated the leaders, he spoke God's truth to God's people. The very task of a prophet, and he spoke it powerfully and forcefully. Through this unusual man and this unusual message, God brought many people to repentance. He focused them back on their sins so that they would see their need for a Savior. And then he said, "Guess what. The Savior is coming. And he is coming soon. I'm not worthy to handle his sandals."

Think of that statement. When is the last time you parents didn't pick up your children's shoes because you were unworthy to? Usually you just don't do it because you don't want to get near them, right, because they are kind of frightening? That's not what he is saying. He's saying, "I'm not worthy of it. I'm not worthy to pick up stinky shoes because someone's coming that is much more important and has much power. I baptize with water and God works through that. He works repentance in your hearts and he leads you back to the Messiah that is coming, but he is going to come and baptize with the Holy Spirit. He is going to baptize with fire—the fire that burns away our sins, the fire that purifies us of our sins and refines the sin and takes them away and makes us pure and holy in God's sight, because the One who is coming would be perfect in our sight. He would provide the righteousness that Isaiah spoke of." And Christ has done that for you and for me and for the whole world.

Now we have become his voices. We are the ones that he has called to be unusual and to speak an unusual message. Now when he has called you to be unusual, don't think that can justify all the times you were a jerk to other people and say, "I'm just being unusual like God wants me to be." No, he has called us to love, right? To encourage and comfort one another and to live in unity with one another in love, not to be jerks, but to be unusual in the sense that we do this. That we put other's interests ahead of our

own. That we don't say it's just all about me. John the Baptist didn't and we don't. We don't want to. We want to say it's all about Jesus. It's all about the One who lived and died in our place. It's all about him and now he has changed me, so we live in ways that aren't the usual, the norm of our society. We say certain things are sin, but then we don't do it in a way that says "you're a sinner, I'm not." We do it in a way that says, "I know the depth of my sin. I know the depth of my depravity. I know that I am not perfect, but I know that I am forgiven. And I want you to be forgiven also."

That's an unusual message today also, isn't it? Usually if anyone says anything is absolute right or wrong, it's going to be perceived as arrogance because quite often there is arrogance attached to it. But you and I, as we are called to preach this message of repentance, are called to preach it in an unusual way—in genuine humility and in genuine love. And you and I don't always do that, do we?

Do we often find ourselves praying the prayer of the Pharisee in the temple "Lord I thank you that I'm not like these other people who hate you and despise you and think this sin is okay or that sin is okay and I know better Lord. Boy, Lord, you are lucky you have me." Do you find your hearts drifting in that direction? Is Satan's current taking you out with that tide? Then hear John's call—repent. Don't make excuses. Repent. Say, "Lord, change my heart. Make me to be that unusual person you want me to be—one who loves unconditionally. Forgive my sins, Lord. Make me that person that is willing to speak a message that many don't want to hear but that they need to hear."

You don't have to go out and buy camel's hair this afternoon. You don't have to go start eating wild locusts and honey. If you want honey, help yourself, but you don't have to. But you and I have been changed by God. We are unusual in that we are different from the world. We have a confidence and a comfort and an encouragement that comes from Jesus' life and death in our place. Many long for it. You and I long for it at times. That is why God has put us together in this family of faith so that we share it with one another, but he has also put us in the world so that we share it with the world. You and I have this incredible privilege of pointing people to the One whose sandals we are not worthy to carry, but the One who carried our sins to the cross, the One who died in our place and in their place.

You and I are the Way Preparers of today. How neat is that?