

The Promise of Hope

Matthew 3:1-12

A little boy and his dad were in church, and the boy asked, "Dad, what does it mean when the people pass those plates?" Dad said, "It means the people are giving gifts to God."

Then the boy asked, "What does it mean when they have those trays stacked up there and bread and wine and people go up and kneel?" Dad answered, "It means they are guests at the Lord's table and they're taking communion."

And then the boy asked, "What does it mean when the preacher lays his watch on the pulpit?" Since the preacher was fairly long-winded and liked to circle the point, several times before getting to it, if he ever did, Dad answered, "It means absolutely nothing, Son, absolutely nothing!"

There is nothing wrong with asking for signs from God. What we must do is be ready. The signs are all around us, just like in a worship service or daily life. All we have to do is look. We associate certain actions, sounds and even smells with certain upcoming events. For example, we know that, after the offering, when Kathy plays the opening notes, we're going to stand and sing the Doxology, giving thanks to God for the blessings of life.

We know that at a baseball game, when you stand to sing the National Anthem, after the umpire or the announcer is going to yell "Play Ball" and the game is going to begin. And we know Christmas is just around the corner because the signs are all around us.

Today we hear from our friendly neighborhood New Testament prophet, weird uncle John, living and crying in the wilderness, and eating locusts and wild honey. Dressing in the latest ascetic outfit of camel skin and leather.

And while it seems intrusive to hear John's message of repentance amid this season of the birth of the Son of God, we also know it marks the beginning of the season of our preparation. And while John seems intrusive, he is really that voice reminding us of the true nature of Christmas and the purpose of this child who will be laid in a manger because there's no room in the inn.

John the Baptist came to be a sign pointing to the one who would follow him. He enters our Christmas celebrations to remind us that Christmas and the birth of Jesus is about more than what we give one another; it's about the gift God has for us.

While a little on the confrontational side, John was just trying to prepare us for the coming of Christ. John didn't know when the Messiah would show up and begin his ministry. All he knew was that he was called to be the one to get people ready for that day. And underlying his message of repentance was a message of hope.

You see, you can't preach repentance without the hope of forgiveness. And you can't have the hope of forgiveness without understanding, at least in some small part, the grace of God which offers that forgiveness. And you can't repent and accept the forgiveness and grace of God without acknowledging that there is something wrong that needs to be forgiven, something broken that needs to be healed.

This baby whose birth we celebrate every year with lights and ornaments, music and gifts; this baby who had no home to call his own; this child of love and grace came to offer us forgiveness. He gave Himself to offer healing to this broken world filled with broken people.

I saw a short video of a mom and her daughter putting up the Christmas tree, talking about the work that needs to be done in the next two days getting ready for the party. The daughter says, "Mom, I'll clean the house if I don't have to go with you all to see Uncle Steve." Mom says, "Nice try. But you're going."

The daughter objects. "But Mom, why should I have to go. I hate going to that place. There's murderers and people who beat their wives...." The argument goes on but Mom puts her foot down.

The daughter relents and starts unpacking more of the Christmas ornaments. She reaches into the box and pulls out her favorite ornament. But she's heartsick because the ornament is broken. It's obviously Mom's favorite too because Mom is upset as well and she says:

"You know, my dad made this for me, when I was six. And he was so careful. He put so much time into every little piece. This one's really precious to me. And you know, every time I hold it, I think about him. And Steve, when he was little, used to take it off the tree and play with it. And I guess now, it kind of reminds me of him, too, cause he's broken just like this. But you know, I can fix this and Steve is so precious to God because God made him. And God can fix him." The daughter apologizes and Mom says, "We'll fix this"

The daughter says, "Why don't we fix it and then we'll go and see Uncle Steve together. " Mom says, "That's a great idea, that's a great idea." They hug and continue getting things ready.

That short clip captures the purpose of John's message. And the purpose of the birth of this baby which we celebrate with such abandon. While John's message seems strident and jarring amid the baby shower atmosphere of Christmas, it really is a message of hope.

This morning the signs are all around us. The tree, the lights, the Chrismons, the nativity, the candles, the wreaths, it all points to the birth of our Savior.

In my understanding, there is no better Promise of Hope. And it should leave each of us ready for the coming of Christ. Get ready through this Promise of Hope.