

December 4, 2016

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Sermon - "The Kingdom is Near"

One of the things I find intriguing about John the Baptist is that he speaks with authority.

When he says that one is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit – no one questions how he knows that.

When he describes the one to come who will sift out the good wheat and throw the remains into the fire, no one challenges him to clarify his metaphors.

Picture John, dressed in camel hair, eating locusts, preaching in the wilderness in a world where religious leaders wore linen robes and spoke from specially designated sections of the temple where they alone were deemed holy enough to enter.

John's father Zechariah is one of these holy priests.

John gives us a whole new perspective on whose voice is important.

How did John the Baptist generate a following in this environment?

I think the Baptist struck a chord with the people.

The people who were living under the oppression of the Roman Empire were hungry for a promise of new life.

The faithful who had been following all of the rules put out by the religious leaders were perhaps looking for a worship setting that was less formal, less judgmental.

John the Baptist, like Isaiah before him, offers a vision of a new world.

During Isaiah's lifetime Israel suffered major deportations with more than 200,000 people deported from Judah in 701 BCE.

Isaiah offers a word of hope giving voice to the dreams of his people.

A new day will dawn.

A new leader will emerge:

The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Whether or not the people actually believed that this new world would materialize, Isaiah knew that the people, all people, need to dream of a better world.

It is a basic human tendency that has allowed hope to flourish in the most destitute of situations.

John the Baptist understood the importance of providing a vision of a world where justice would reign and all would be saved.

I can't help but wonder if cousins John and Jesus had studied Isaiah's prophecies together.

Were they exposed to the prophet's words by John's father, Zechariah, the high priest?

We know that Isaiah's words were the ones Jesus chose for his introductory sermon in his hometown synagogue.

We know that Jesus' ministry which is just about to start was based on a message of peace.

Isaiah's holy mountain and John's kingdom of God are the same place.

It is the place that humans dream of living – a place where they feel safe and loved, nourished and cared for.

One commentator described it this way: “One thing that this “voice in the wilderness” made very clear is that God's Reign is not just a “place” or a “state of being” that we receive passively.

Although we become citizens of God's Reign purely by grace, when we become part of God's new world, God's new world becomes part of us.

This means that who we are, what we think, how we feel, and how we behave are all shaped and formed by the values and purposes of God's Reign.

It's not just Jesus that we invite into our hearts, but God's new way of being.”

My interpretation of John's words “ The kingdom is near” has always been one of promise, not doom.

I believe that the promise of God's kingdom is real and that we have the ability to bring it to fruition.

I don't think John's prophesy describes an ‘endtime’ or the resurrection of the dead into the eternal kingdom of God.

I think John is rallying his followers to recognize that they are living in God's kingdom and that they alone have the power to bring their visions and dreams to reality.

John shouts the message from his wild perch on the banks of the Jordan.

Jesus will carry that message throughout the land offering God's peace everywhere he turns.

On this second Sunday of advent, when we have lit the candle of Peace, let us embrace the idea that we have the ability to generate this peace among ourselves.

I invite you to turn to your neighbor and offer a sign of Christ's peace. (Pause)

This is how it starts – reaching your hand out to a stranger; looking someone in the eye with compassion; opening your heart to really care about the person sitting next to you.

My friends, the kingdom of God is indeed near.

It is here, waiting to break through.

It is important that we dream of a better future – one where there is peace and justice for all, but why don't we live as if it were already here.

What if we lay aside all contempt and judgment and offered only tenderness?

What if we surrendered defensiveness and wrapped ourselves in a cloak of righteousness and faithfulness?

What if God was the first thought you had in every interaction?

Think of this: When you meet someone (whether new or familiar), your first thought is that you are encountering God.

Go through your day looking for God, noticing where the Holy Spirit shows up.

When you hear a news story or gossip, listen through the lens of God's voice speaking to you – sending you a message.

What is God saying to me here?

We can do this.

John the Baptist calls us first to repentance.

First we must acknowledge that we don't live as if we are residents of God's kingdom.

Next we must commit to wanting to live in God's kingdom.

The choice is really up to you.

You can live by society's rules or you can choose to live on God's holy mountain following God's law – the law of peace and compassion.

The kingdom of God is near – tantalizingly close – all we have to do is open our hearts, souls and minds and let the light in.

Let us pray.