Good morning!

Today we continue our study on the person of John the Baptist, the original voice crying out in the wilderness. When we take a look at who John was and what he said, we can get a pretty good idea of who we are and what we ought to say. After all, John was a prophet…he spoke the words of God. And we in our modern day setting are called to do the same. We can be the voice that cries out that declares to the world around us. Prepare! Repent! And today we cry out, Believe!

Now, being a person who speaks the words of God has never been a recipe for popularity. In fact, most prophets find life to be quite a challenge. God’s word does not usually go down like a spoon full of sugar. In fact, I had a professor in seminary who would joke about it. Near the entrance to the seminary building at Bethel there is an inscription on the wall. It is a quote from the book of Isaiah, and it says “Here I am, send me.” It is a galvanizing and inspiring way to answer God’s call. “And then,” my professor would say, “you take an Old Testament class and learn about what happens to Isaiah.” It does not always go so well for him. The point being, we should be aware of what we are signing up for.

If you have ever purchased something online, you know this feeling. You found an item for a great price, only to discover the cost of shipping! And your smile fades when you realize the actual price is not what you expected it to be.

A modern sales pitch can be like this. As you may or may not know, my wife and I are going to be moving…next month in fact. We are actually building a new house here in town. It is beautiful, at least for the time being. It is a large and will serve our family well. When we were sold on the idea of building a new home, the company used a phrase “everything included.” Buy a new home, everything included! Well, I mean literally, what more could you ask for!

Well, once the house goes up, questions arise…mostly questions of what the builder meant by everything…well, okay, so there is no washer and dryer, but everything else is included. Well, so there is no garage door opener, but hey the garage doors are included. And yes, when talking about an entire new house, these are relatively small details, and I would say that we have been very happy with our experience, yet there is a sense in which we were sold a line that was not quite true.

I daresay we as a church and as individual Christians are guilty of the same thing. We don’t always mention the actual price tag of following Jesus. We have come to think of Jesus as a clearance rack add-on to our lives. Give Jesus a try! It’s free! It’s easy. It doesn’t require anything all you have to do is…believe!

And truer words were never spoken. All you have to do is believe. It really is that easy. God is so generous and merciful that he truly made it that simple. John the Baptist preaches to the people in John 3:36 saying “Whoever believe in the Son has eternal life.” It is true, it is good news.

But there is more….John finishes the thought, “Whoever doesn’t believe in the Son won’t see life, but the angry judgement of God remains on them.” Hmmm, not so nice. We don’t really want to think about God’s anger right now…it’s Christmas time….did you really have to say that John? Couldn’t we go back to the eternal life part and leave it there?

See the two notions are one and the same. We are quick to say that God is loving and just, right? But if God is truly just, then we will hate what is wrong. A just God will hate injustice, he will hate evil. So yes, God is love, and because he is love, he hates what is sinful. Therein lies the problem….you and I? We’re sinful. But God cannot become unjust even for our sake. He can’t be untrue to his very nature. If God were unjust, we could hang out with him. He would be able to be around sin, but then he would not be God. So because he is God, he hates sin, and because we are sinners, we are under his judgement, his wrath…or the CEB uses the word anger.

So it is important that we declare the whole story, the whole truth. Those who believe will be saved….those who do not…will not.

So what is belief anyway? What is salvation? What does it entail? I mean, do I just have to say I believe? I could verbally assent to anything, but that does not necessarily indicate where my heart lies. Does it?

There are two main ways to understand salvation. Both are different, and both are correct. Probably the most common understanding that we have in our western culture is in legal terms. In a court of law a defendant is either found to be guilty or innocent. By the time the trial is over, the judge has declared the legal standing of the defendant. Paul uses this thought process when he says that the law, that is God’s rules, points at us and says that we are guilty. You have broken such and such commandment. And if you have broken one, you might as well have broken them all because you are guilty just the same. This is why Jesus provides us with good news. The Law brings judgement, but God is merciful and in a legal transaction, Jesus took our guilt upon himself. He did not just bail us out…he took on our punishment….the death sentence. Now, through Jesus, we can be deemed innocent by the divine justice system.

However, salvation can also be seen as a cure to a crippling disease called sin. We are all born into sin and we are all wasting away under its effects. But Jesus has provided a cure to our sickness. But the symptoms of our sickness can still persist. While we live this life we will always be plagued with bouts of selfishness and anger, or worry or addiction. The idea is that as we live into Christ, as we continue to make him a part of our lives, over time we mature and progress. Over time the symptoms of our disease become less and less. We put on Christ as Paul calls it…we live into the cure.

As I said both understandings are needed. Once a person comes to faith in Jesus, they are at that moment declared innocent and they have also at that same moment been cured of their sin disease. So Salvation is both instantaneous (you are now innocent) as well as a process (making sure you take your medicine.)

We like to stay stuck in the instant side of things. I have accepted Jesus, I believe he was born of the virgin Mary, I believe he died and rose for me. So….I’m good to go…I can carry on with life. The Apostle Paul understands things a bit differently…he tells the Phillipian church to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Meaning, through our belief in Jesus, you and I are entering into relationship with a totally just and holy God. That reality in and of itself should not be happening, it should not be possible. Our sin should condemn us beyond all hope, our disease should be a death sentence. But thanks be to God! He did not leave us alone in this plight. Christ took our punishment and we are now both allowed and expected to live into the cure. Put away the life of sin, leave the way you used to be in the past, that’s the repent piece and work out your salvation. Fight against the old self, commit to living out the cure, respond to the death of Christ by giving your life to Him.

The Holy Spirit helps us in this. Paul also write in 2 Cor. 12:3 that no one can truly say “Jesus is Lord”, unless it is by the power of the Holy Spirit working within. This working out of our salvation is a combination of our willingness to believe and the Sprit animating or empowering that belief. He is the administrator of the cure.

When it comes down to it, belief is trust. I don’t just believe that Jesus was born of a virgin at some point in history. I don’t just believe that Jesus rose from the dead at some point in history…I trust him. I trust him because I know him…And the more I get to know him, the more I trust him. And to trust is to obey. To trust is to obey. Believing in Jesus means that I trust him and obey him…sounds like an old familiar hymn…Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey. It’s a relationship, that cycles on itself. The more I trust Jesus the more I obey…and the more I obey the more I know I can trust him and so belief in Jesus is an “everything included” situation. There’s no other way. Other ways shortchange who Jesus us. Other ways stifle the joy that comes from receiving salvation. Other ways are rabbit trails and tangents that distract from the one true Way…

Jesus reiterates for us the greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and for all you muscle heads out there, with all your strength. Heart, soul, mind and strength….it is an everything included proposition.

We all have those places in our hearts and those dark corners of our lives that we try to hide from God. We all have those habits we don’t want to surrender. We all have reservations…Can I really trust God? Can I really give Jesus everything? Can I really know him in that way?

All I can say is, yes you can. Give Jesus a try, all you have to do is believe, but just know that believing includes everything. The price tag is high, but you are going to pay it to someone somewhere anyway. We might as well cash it all in and offer it back to our loving Creator who has made a way for us to believe and be saved.

For those who might not yet believe, I encourage you to talk to a Christian who does. Ask them whatever question you might have! And take a look at God’s word. Start reading through the Gospel of John. Find out who Jesus is.

For those who do believe, first of all thank God! Thank you Lord for saving me. Next, let your heart break for those who do not know Jesus. I want to encourage you to write down on your bulletin sheet one name of someone who does not believe. Write two names….three names. Then pray. Ask God to use you. You have the words to eternal life…You are a modern day prophet!...don’t keep it to yourself. Don’t hide it away. Declare! Tell those who don’t know to believe and be saved. Because John the Baptist will not let us forget, that if they don’t believe…they won’t be saved.

Believing in Jesus, trusting him and obeying him…it means “everything’s included”. So I declare to you today: Believe! Give Jesus everything and call others to that same belief!