Messengers: The One Who Cries in the Wilderness Memory Verse: Luke 3:18

Dec. 17th. 2023 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-9

SLIDE 1: TITLE

You know that wherever we go, we are bombarded with messages. From billboards, to TV and radio, from friends and family members, from your phone. We are likely to hear someone say, ”Did you get my message? I left you a message.” Maybe in that question we can hear the voice of God: “Did you get my message? I left you a message.” But during this time of Advent, we are choosing to turn down some of these other messages we receive and focus instead on the Messengers of Advent, those who deliver God’s word. What do they have to share with us? Can we find enough time to listen to the message they have left for us? Can we truthfully say to God, “Yes, I got your message, thank you.”

**SLIDE 2: “Yes, I got your message, thank you.”**

We began with the archangel Gabriel. He brought a strange and amazing message to an unassuming young woman named Mary. His message to her is spoken to us as well: “Nothing is impossible for God.” Are we listening to his message? Then Mary herself becomes a messenger in her our right proclaiming the importance of possessing a ready heart, a heart than can then, in turn, deliver the Word of God. Is your heart ready? Are you listening? Last week we talked briefly about a man named Alred Delp, a Jesuit priest who was arrested and eventually executed for resisting the Nazi regime. If anyone was acquainted with darkness of the human heart, it was Delp. He endured trials and beatings and isolation and hopeless circumstances. And yet, Delp had an ear out for the Messengers of Advent. He found unseen hope in old promises spoken by God’s faithful messengers the next of whom is none other than John the Baptist, a.k.a. the one who cries in the wilderness.

**SLIDE 3: John The Baptist**

John was delivering the word of God before he himself was even delivered from the womb. If you recall the story in Luke 1:41. Mary visits her relative Elizabeth, a woman who was barren but is now pregnant with a son to be dedicated to the Lord. When Mary enters in, John leaps inside his mother’s womb and, Luke says, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Even before his birth, John was responding to the Word of God. It makes me think of all the singers and pop stars who talk about how they have been singing since they were two years old; singing before they could even remember. They are trying to make the point that they were just born to sing, it was always in them. Well, John can go even further…I have been serving the Lord even before I was born! I have been proclaiming the word of the Lord even before I drew my first breath! And let us not forget, this little episode, this leaping action of a baby in utero was not simply a cute and precious memory that Elizabeth recounted and that Luke decided to write down. There is more to the story, a supernatural aspect, because, as we mentioned, in that moment Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. God was up to something in the leap that occurred within her. Elizabeth received the message given by her unborn son, she was completely on board with Mary’s outlandish story, she could affirm in all faith that the Son Mary carried was indeed her Lord. She proclaims to Mary, or as the CEB puts it, she blurted out to Mary these words, “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

**SLIDE 4: “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”**

Isn’t the same true from us? Happy are those who believe in the promises of God! Happy are those who look beyond the present circumstance and claim an unseen promise.

This rambunctious baby is born roughly six months before Jesus is to be born. His parents name him John and his father, the priest Zechariah, has some powerful words to prophecy over his son, who himself will become a prophet. He says of John, “You will be called a prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved.” There is some foreshadowing here…something yet to come. Let’s keep out eyes and ears open for this instruction on how to be saved. We will come back to that.

Then, we are told in verse 80 that John grew up, “becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.” What does it mean when it says that John was in the wilderness? Well, we don’t have a lot of details. We can basically say that John did not live within city limits. He was more of a nomad, a wanderer. We learn from Mark that when John does appear, he is wearing clothing made from camel’s hide and eating locust with wild honey. He is certainly a character, a commanding presence. An outcast, a little bizarre, a little wacky. And he is loud! He is out by the river shouting about being baptized and repenting. He is calling the Jewish leaders and teachers out as snakes and going on about a coming judgement. He even seems to denigrate our relationship to Abraham! He says that God could make children of Abraham out of the very rocks on the ground! He is yelling about trees and fruit and axes cutting them down…He tells tax collectors to take only that is legal and he tells soldiers not to cheat or harass anyone. Why is he even talking to those people? Aren’t they the real snakes?

John was certainly an interesting character, the kind of guy you just could not look away from. And he had a certain effect upon his listeners. We read in Luke 3:15, after hearing John’s words, “The people were filled with expectation…”

**SLIDE 5: “The people were filled with expectation…”**

Expectation is what Advent is all about. Expectation is what prayer is all about. Expectation is what faith is all about. We are people of expectation. We are people who expect great things from our great God. We expect to see his promises fulfilled!

Alfred Delp was a man of expectation, or at least he thought he was. Now, he was a prisoner sentenced to solitary confinement, even undergoing torture so that he might renounce his faith. What was there to expect when he was in the grips of evil? Delp writes from his cell, “Not for an hour can we dispense with these John-the-Baptist characters, these original individuals, struck by the lightning of mission and vocation. Their heart goes before them, and that is why their eye is so clear-sighted, their judgement so incorruptible.” It’s the faithfulness of the heart that gives clear sight. Delp continues, “They do not cry for the sake of crying or for the sake of the voice…Theirs is the great comfort known only to those who have paced out the inmost and furthermost boundaries of existence. They cry for blessing and salvation…They summon us to the opportunity of warding off, by the greater power of a converted heart, the shifting desert that will pounce upon us and bury us.” Again, it’s a pure heart that protects from the death of the wilderness.

Delp was stuck in that desert, imprisoned in that wilderness, it looked like, before too long, he would be buried. But the voice of John, the voice of the one who cries in the wilderness was a voice that was able to reach the ears of a worn and weary Alfred Delp. And what does this voice say? What is John’s message? Verse 18: “With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.”

**SLIDE 6: “With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.”**

The appeal is, Repent! Change the way you live! Turn back to God! This is the way of salvation, this is the instruction that John was supposed to declare via that prophecy spoken over him so many years ago. The good news is, forgiveness is available. Removal of sin is at hand. It is a message from the wilderness for those wandering through the wilderness. It is a message from a free man for those who are imprisoned. Ironically, the free messenger, John, is soon to be thrown into prison for his message even as those who hear his message are set free by it.

Alfred Delp was set free. Even in chains, he was a man with a converted heart, a heart that had strength enough to ward off the effects of the wilderness, a heart that cried out for blessing and salvation. Because of this heart, Delp was able to possess clear sight of God’s promises, promises that could not be dimmed by the executioner’s noose. Promises that could not be buried by death itself.

Delp writes, “How shall we hear unless someone cries out above the tumult and destruction and delusion?”

**SLIDE 7: “How shall we hear unless someone cries out above the tumult and destruction and delusion?”**

Tumult, destruction and delusion…this imprisoned priest, listening to the voice of the one who cries in the wilderness, is able to see with clear eyes: this world is not as it should be. It is in fact, not peaceful, but tumultuous and people are not good deep down, but destructive. And all of us, especially around the holiday season, are so susceptible to the delusion that things are not all that bad. We live in suburbia, land of the hidden troubles, pretty facades, and self-sufficient lives. We live amongst good people and we endorse the idea of common goodwill. But John’s voice enters abruptly into our well-manicured lives, and we look at him askew as he starts shouting out, Repent! Change your hearts and lives! Repent and be forgiven! But if we are deluded, we cannot heed these words. After all, how can I repent if I have done nothing wrong? Why should I change my life when I am already living well? Why do I need a Savoir, a holy infant Child to come and set me free when I have no chains to speak of? Yet the voice shouts on, the message of Advent persists, and those who have ears to hear, they will listen, they will repent, and they will be saved.

The New Testament writers peg John the Baptist as the embodiment and fulfillment of the words spoken in Isaiah chapter 40. In this passage, God extends comfort to his people, a people overcome by enemies, a people needing hope. John serves as the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled, every mountain and hill will be leveled. The crooked will be made straight, and the rough places made smooth. All humanity will see God’s salvation.” This is a good time to let Elizabeth’s words sink in, “Happy are those who believe in the promises of God. Happy are those who can see beyond the present circumstance and claim an unseen promise.

It was in Oct. 2018 when the ground was broken for our home that was going to be built in a new neighborhood. We had made all the financial arrangements, and the builder had all the plans in place, but this is what we saw (PICTURE OF DITCH IN GROUND).

**SLIDE 8: HOLE**

This was the reality…a large hole. The way had been prepared, the hill had been leveled, the rough places were made smooth…but a home? No, it was a hole. But we trusted in the promises made by the companies we worked with, we held fast to a reality that was not yet. And sure enough, footings were laid and walls were poured and eventually a skeleton of a house was erected. Over the course of about 5 months, we were able to move into our new home.

**SLIDE 9-10: HOUSE**

Well we know God is calling each of us to a faith that exceeds a 5 month shelf life. God is calling us to a lifetime of faith, a lifetime of keeping our eyes set on the home that is not yet, but that is coming. Happy are those who believe in the promises of God.

Indeed, Christmas morning reveals to us our Savior, and Advent, if we are paying attention, if we are listening to its messengers, reveals to us our desperate need for that Savior. We are not okay, this world is not okay, but God is good, and through this coming Christmas event, as John declares, all humanity will see God’s salvation.

Once more I close with a final thought from Alfred Delp, “Let the crying voices ring out, pointing out the wilderness and overcoming the devastation from within.”

**SLIDE 11: “Let the crying voices ring out, pointing out the wilderness and overcoming the devastation from within.”**

Could you and I be that voice? We may not demand attention like John did. We may not be born into the role in the sense that he was. We may not shout as loudly on the outskirts of town, but like John, could we issue an appeal to the people around us? Could we proclaim good news? Yes, yes we could. Yes we can…yes, we must! “Let the crying voices ring out, pointing out the wilderness and overcoming the devastation from within.” Salvation has come and we can expect great things from our great God. We can expect to conquer life’s wilderness, however bleak, we can expect to conquer death itself through repentant hearts; a message of Advent. Amen.