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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, December 10, 2017
2nd Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B

Primary Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Sermon Title: “Be Found at Peace, without Spot or Blemish”

Theme

John called people to repent, to clear the decks, to completely reorder their lives so that nothing would get in the way of the Lord’s coming. The reading from Isaiah gives the context for this radical call: the assurance of forgiveness that encourages us to repent; the promise that the coming one will be gentle with the little ones. Isaiah calls us all to be heralds with John, to lift up our voices fearlessly and say, “See, your God is coming!” We say it to one another in worship, in order to say it with our lives in a world in need of justice and peace.

Text

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,’ ”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Sermon

I would like to begin by picking up where we left off last week. And this will be fun for me because it will be an indication of whether anyone listens to me or not.

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge for last week was this; there is no greater time than the present, this beginning of the season of Advent to prepare ourselves to be found blameless, yes, blameless on the day of the Lord. And we can do that by enhancing our discipleship, devoting ourselves to confession and prayer and asking God for the good gifts of the Spirit. Then, should the Lord return, we will be ready and blameless. That's what I said at the end of the sermon last week.

Now if you took my exhortation and went home and began your preparation by enhancing your discipleship and devoting yourselves to confession and prayer and asking God for the good gifts of the Spirit, then you are ready and blameless.

So I really want a show of hands, are you ready and blameless?

And then I want to continue this week with the conclusion for this week's sermon already, here at the beginning. And a clue to the conclusion is the title of the sermon, "Be Found at Peace, without Spot or Blemish."

Though this week's first reading is also from Isaiah like last week's, it is from an earlier part of Isaiah. In this passage from Isaiah, it is the LORD God himself who is doing the speaking, albeit through the prophet. And in summary, what the LORD said was, Israel's troubles are coming to an end. Remember last week I gave you a little OT history and explained that because of Israel's disobedience, God allowed their enemies to overtake them and that led to the Babylonian exile and generations of trouble.

But that period of punishment was going to come to an end said the LORD. The voice of the LORD is compassionate, and hopeful, but the LORD also promised to send one to help the Israelites to prepare themselves. That one was simply described as a voice crying out in the wilderness.

Mark the author of our Gospel Reading came to the conclusion that that voice was John, John the Baptizer, and indeed, from his conception forward John was ..., how shall I say it politely; unusual, weird, peculiar.

It is Mark who told us the details of John's strange life on the fringe of society. He was a fire and brimstone preacher. He baptized those who were moved by his message and were repentant. A ritual washing was not uncommon in the First Century; that is what the jugs were for that Jesus turned into wine at the wedding of Cana. But John was an unlikely presider. He had no formal training. But that didn't stop him. No one dared stop him. Have you ever met someone, who without any real credentials, just moves into a position and handles it because they just carry themselves so confidently that everyone else just steps back? Well that was John.

And his eccentricities continued in his personal habits. He wore clothing of camel's hair. Now I have what is known as a camel's hair sport coat. That is not what John wore.

John the Baptist didn't care much for fashion. He was a prophet, and his clothing matched his mission. John's clothing was similar to his predecessor Elijah, who wore "a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist" (2 Kings 1:8, also see Zechariah 13:4).

John was not a king, nor did he pretend to be one. Jesus, later in his ministry, spoke to the crowds about John, saying, "What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet" (Matthew 11:8-9).

The gospels portray John as a rough kind of man. He didn't live in a king's house, but in the wilderness. He didn't eat kingly food; instead he ate locusts and wild honey.

Locusts are not something I eat for dinner, and if you live in the West, I'm guessing you don't either. But in the East, locusts don't have the same stigma attached to them. In fact, locusts are listed as one of the allowable foods in the Levitical Law (and if you're still not so sure about eating locusts, don't worry, grasshoppers are also permitted): *...you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind (Leviticus 11:22).*

John also ate raw honey. The Old Testament makes many references to Israel being

a land "flowing with milk and honey." As such, John must have had plenty of fructose and glucose to digest in between his locust feasts. Perhaps sometimes he combined locusts with honey for his main dish. You can imagine the vast (well, sort of...) number of recipes he must have had: honey roasted locusts, honey dipped dried locusts, maybe even a honey-locust flavored drink.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm sure John ate something other than locusts and honey. However, for at least the time of his ministry, he was known for having a diet primarily consisting of locusts and honey.

The words that Jesus spoke later in His ministry were true. John certainly "did not come eating or drinking" (Matthew 11:18). John's diet was simple. He was a voice, calling out in the wilderness, and what he ate and wore matched his mission.

And I believe that his eccentricities made him all the more attractive to the people of Palestine. I mean, in a day of little entertainment, he was the best show in town! Everyone, even the religious professionals, went out to see him. But his mission was to get the Jews prepared, prepared for the one who came after him. John knew his role in the ongoing story of God, and he played it with raw abandon.

Of course, Jesus was the one who was to come. And Jesus is the one whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Eve, but also the one who said he would return, and so he is also the one we prepare for during the season of Advent. You see, John's message of preparation for Jesus' coming on to the scene in the First Century is just as important today as we look forward to his coming again. We need to be ready.

And jumping to the Second Reading, Peter, told his readers what he thought that readiness should include. Incidentally, he addressed a concern about why the Lord Jesus had not yet returned – in the First Century! Here we are 2000 years later and he still has not returned. Peter wrote that this is to our benefit, so that "all may come to repentance." So that is good news for those of you who did not raise your hand earlier.

Peter, not unlike Paul last week, wrote that we who want to be found ready should be leading lives of *holiness* and *godliness*. Holy means set aside for God's purposes, therefore leading a life of *holiness* means an acknowledgement that though we are free to live our lives as we choose, that is how much God loves us,

we ought to acknowledge that we belong to God and therefore everything we do ought to be, at the very least, worthy of our status of being set aside for God's purposes. And *godliness* means to conduct ourselves in a godly manner. Not clear what that means? Read scripture. It is full of instruction on what it means to be godly.

And at the conclusion of this passage Peter wrote his most concise instructions. He wrote,

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ^{15a}and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

“At peace” and “without spot or blemish.”

Do you bring peace into your life's situations; your marriage, family, work, friends, community? I hope so. One of the names ascribed to our Lord Jesus, is Prince of Peace. If we want to be his disciples, we ought to be about the things that matter to Jesus. We should be about bringing peace into every situation we find ourselves. The world should be listening to my sermon today!

And again, not unlike last week's exhortation to be ready by being “blameless”, this week's exhortation is to include being found without spot or blemish.

Now just so you know, the LORD is not all that concerned about zits and even skin tone. Peter is, of course, speaking about our lives of discipleship. And while that seems impossible to us, and it is, nothing is impossible for God.

And so I will end with a Raisin' the Bar Challenge like last weeks.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

There is no greater time than the present, this Second Week of the season of Advent to prepare ourselves to be found at peace and without spot or blemish, on the day of the Lord. We can do that by enhancing our discipleship, devoting ourselves to confession and prayer and asking God for the good gifts of the Spirit. Then, should the Lord return, we will be found “at peace and without spot or blemish.”

Prayer

Lord God you challenge us once again with terms that we simply do not consider worthy of human contemplation. Thankfully, through your Son's work on the cross our salvation has already been won. Therefore, help us to seek to be your agents of peace, and through our confession of our shortcomings, make us without spot or blemish – for his sake. It is in his name we pray. Amen