

Second Sunday of Advent – December 6, 2015, Year C

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 3:1-6, Isaiah 40:1-11

"Get the Word Out!"

Isaiah 40:8 *"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever."*

Funny, when I was in seminary, we had some British professors and also some from Canada – who pronounce Isaiah as Ay-zaya. So, Isaiah or Ay-zaya – potato or po-tat-oh – the Word is what counts! How we see the Word of God is what differentiates us from a lot of people. Do you believe the “red letters” in the Bible? Do you believe that the Word that Jesus spoke is the Word that we receive as written and sent down to us? I do! And that is what this is all about; that is why we are here in this building. We are blessed to own this building; we are here and have been set apart and may God bless us, protect us and let us thrive for His service!

Since the beginning of time it has been no secret that God has a plan for our salvation. He showed those He spoke to and through - that He wanted all of humanity to have the opportunity to be saved from an endless eternity without Him, and that to prevent it He would send a Savior. God sent prophets - with that message announced with absolute clarity and certainty. One of those Prophets was a man named Isaiah, who lived about 700 years before Jesus, and then there was another whose name was John. John the Baptist's whole purpose in life was to be a sort of opening act, the warm-up act, the forerunner, the evangelist, who would proclaim the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ - the Lamb of God – the “Messiah” or “the anointed one” to a nation - to a world - drenched in the darkness of sin.

I believe that God never intended for the birth and the life of His Son, Jesus, to be a secret. He had revealed by many prophetic witnesses throughout the Old Testament that Jesus, His “anointed one” His Messiah, would truly be born. He even said where – that is would be in the City of David, in Bethlehem. He had given Isaiah words to write that described, in detail, what Jesus' purpose would be. God had sent His holy angels to sing Hallelujahs on the hills of Judea and then God placed a star in the sky to guide those who were watching - right to the very place of Jesus' birth and where Mary and Joseph stayed after the birth of Christ. God anointed John to be His forerunner, preaching and preparing for the coming of the Lord. No one witnessed the coming of the Son of God except for a few shepherds, a few wise men and some barnyard animals – but yet the truth of His birth has made it two thousand years into the hearts of men and women – changing lives and saving souls.

Throughout the Old Testament, God had tried to give mankind every possible clue; but, no surprise here, mankind wasn't listening, mankind wasn't watching and didn't really understand what they were waiting for. Though Israel had longed for the Messiah to come, they really didn't know who He was when He came. They were expecting a warrior king!

John the Baptizer stood along the banks of the River Jordan, which by the way is no wider than this room. St. John's River in Jacksonville is wider than the Jordan! John stood on the banks of the Jordan with powerful preaching. It had been hundreds of years since Israel had heard this kind of preaching. John's message was strong and uncompromising. He had a message to deliver and boy, did he deliver it.

His message was one of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Please turn with me to page 1596 of your Pew Bibles so that we can look at today's Holy Gospel from Luke 3:4-6. In it says that John was, echoing our first reading from the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "*A voice of one*

calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' 'Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.' 'And all people will see God's salvation.' John wasn't a man to mince words or even to beat around the bush. He spoke what the Holy Spirit inspired him to say and let the chips fall where they may. When the religious leaders and the crowds of people would come near - they never left without getting an earful of God's message. Listen to just how strong his message was. Immediately following today's Holy Gospel – in Luke 3:7-8 John boldly told those religious leaders *"You brood of vipers"* (I mean who wants to be called a snake? – nobody likes to be called names, let alone slithering reptiles!) *"Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I say to you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."* John was telling them it is about who you believe in – not who you are related to!

John's words cut right into the heart of the sinner and brought them to their knees in repentance. That kind of preaching and power only comes through the power of the Holy Spirit! Of course not everyone who heard him would repent. Many would walk away still lost in their sin. Many in need of his message would repent and then allow John to baptize them, wash them clean in the river. God had him baptize so many that he became known as John the Baptizer or John the Baptist, instead of John the son of Zachariah.

I want to suggest to you - what good does it do for any of us to say that **"Jesus is the Reason for the Season,"** unless we recognize right up front that **sin and salvation are the reasons for Jesus' Coming in the first place?** The message of repentance from sin and salvation from sin needs to be heard – and that people are truly in need of a Savior. Unfortunately, there are some people who believe that they have no need of any help, and they don't need a Savior! Honestly, we should be doing the same thing that John the Baptist did, proclaiming the coming of the Lord to a world lost in sin! John was called to be getting the Word out! It is not popular to be a Christian in today's day and age; you hear us called "right wing freaks" and all sorts of nasty names, but Jesus told us that was going to happen.

It is important for us to recognize **the need for belief and faith in a big God** – and **not a bigger faith or belief in God**. Do you understand what I am saying here? God is big! He wants us to do one thing besides believe – trust him! The Greek word used in the New Testament for **faith and belief** is πιστεύω (pisteuo). This word is an important ingredient in our lives and personal relationship with God, especially in our prayer life with Him. How we respond to salvation by grace, through faith - is so important. I want you to hear the Apostle Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-9 *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."* **There is nothing we can do to earn heaven!** Salvation is a gift from God – because of our belief in Him, our faith in Him and that grace flows abundantly to us from Him. How we respond to this gift of salvation, by grace through faith - is life changing: not only for us but for those people around us, who see the transformation that has taken place in our lives;

- how we have changed,
- how our language changes, (gee – he didn't always talk like that!)
- how our demeanor changes,
- how we treat others.

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We need to respond through grateful obedience to this precious gift – a gift of which the Apostle James tells us we need to not “sit on our hands” but we need to get the Word out! He says in James 2:17-18 *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." "But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."* You may have heard it as “faith without works is dead.” I much prefer *"faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* We do things for people because we have been saved and out of grateful obedience we want to share that love and the news of salvation with others. You cannot earn it. It is not about doing things to earn our place in heaven. We should be so grateful to God for this gift that we want to do things for those around us, to serve.

The Greek word for getting the Word out is κηρύσσω (kerusso). Kay Russo is not the lady who served lunch in the cafeteria when you were in high school! Kerusso κηρύσσω means “proclaiming, or preaching” – living God’s Word so that others benefit from our efforts. (Actually the woman who used to serve the “hockey pucks” as hamburgers on the lunch line when I was in high school was really named Kay Russo! That is why I think of her with this Greek word.) John the Baptist preached in the wilderness and you and I are in a sort of wilderness today too. We live in a fallen world with people who are looking for something – and that something is Jesus. How we respond makes all the difference.

A few years ago our daughter Theresa was in Jacksonville, Florida at the Youth with a Mission base, (YWAM) attending DTS (Discipleship Training School). It was just three years ago. The DTS is divided into two parts: a twelve-week lecture phase, followed by a nine-week outreach phase. In order to graduate from the DTS, both phases must be successfully completed. She was originally going to Nepal and India, which changed to India. Then they changed it to South America, with Guyana and Suriname. To our surprise, none of those places was where Theresa went to! Theresa then headed with other members of her team to Turkey – to share the Gospel – and undertake the task of getting the Word out! They were headed to the seat of the Holy Roman Empire where Paul himself brought the Gospel. Theresa was so excited because Paul is one of her spiritual heroes.

Theresa felt a call on her life since she was around 5 years old, when she would boldly proclaim that she was going to be a missionary. She knew God’s call on her life even at the age of 5! I didn’t know then that I was going to be a priest – and here I am celebrating my tenth anniversary of ordination as a priest this coming Friday, December 11th; amazingly enough at St. John’s Cathedral in Jacksonville, Florida. I had no clue. It is incredible that this 5 year old knew so clearly - and that in itself was exciting to see come fruition. I have got to tell you how scared we were – Turkey? A Muslim country, where you have got to cover your head? Believe it or not, she and others from YWAM went into Coffee Houses, because that is where the free internet was, and were sharing the Gospel with men and women sitting in the coffee houses. What a unique opportunity! We were scared for her and she was bold enough to go out and do what God had told her to do! Amazing!

John preached about the coming harvest of men’s souls and that message is just as real today as it was then. John said that Jesus was coming; Jesus, the Master builder, the Chief Cornerstone, the very Son of God, who had all power in Heaven and in Earth, and He was coming for a purpose. John proclaimed the truth in John 1:29 *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* We get to sing that later.

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I have told you about the New Wineskins Missionary Network, and earlier this year Sharon Steinmiller came here to St. Andrew's to speak to us. Bishop Neil spoke last week about the New Wineskins Conference which takes place every three years at Ridgecrest, North Carolina. This is an awesome Network of Missionaries – who live and carry the Gospel to the four corners of the earth. Just 6 years ago we took a van with nine members of St. Bartholomew's to Ridgecrest, for a remarkable time of learning and sharing by missionaries. Three years ago we took 2 vans filled with 13 people. As Bishop Neil Lebhar mentioned last week – it is a life changing experience. I have some full color flyers in the back of the church. I hope you will take one and look it over. If for nothing else just to look at the information and know what is out there.

This coming April 7-10, from Thursday to Sunday, Missionaries and Lay people, Bishops and Archbishops from around the world will gather to worship together, to give and hear testimonies and teach about people groups who need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is going to be a precious time and I hope you will take a flyer. There will be something for all ages! Please take a flyer and check out the website: www.newwineskins.org.

The message that John preached has never changed and never will change until time is no more. It was simple:

- Make your paths straight!
- Repent of your sin!
- Call upon the name of the Lord.
- Believe in Jesus and that He has shed blood on the cross for the remission of your sins.

Each one of us is called to preach about the Coming of Jesus for He is indeed coming soon. Like John we are called to be getting the Word out!

In closing, I need to ask you a personal question: If Jesus came tomorrow and asked you “So what have I done for you?” “How have we made a difference together?” What could you tell Him? Would you say – “I’ll get back to you on that!” Would you have to search for some piece of paper where you have written it down or can you tell what Jesus has done in your life, from your heart in a moment’s notice? Some of you can, because I have heard the stories that you have told me of what Jesus has done, and how you have carried that message. It should be part of your DNA –and not something you need to look up. If you are asked about your children or grandchildren – admit it – you could go on for hours. Why do we have to prepare or stutter or stammer before telling others about Christ in your life? Where is your faith? It is funny, as we were preparing for the parade last night, these young people who would be handing out flyers, were saying “what should I say?” “What should I tell people?” I told them “Merry Christmas,” “God loves you,” and then I stopped and I said “don’t worry about what to say, for the Holy Spirit will give you the words” Jesus said so! At the end of the parade as we were turning in to the old middle school, one of the girls came over to me and gave me a high five and said “I can’t believe what we just did!” What a message! What a message. You need to trust in Him to give you the words. Jesus told us in three of the Gospels: in Luke 12:11-12; in Matthew 10:19-20; and in Mark 13:11 “(Matthew 10:19-20 NIV) *“Do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”*”

We need to do our part –

- By taking a chance, or as Bishop Neil said – “taking a risk.”
- By getting the Word out,

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- By going out on a limb for Jesus – after all –
- Jesus went on a cross for us!