

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 3rd Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2014

Christ's Messenger
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
Third Sunday of Advent

December 14, 2014

Luke 1:46b-55, John 1:6-8, 19-28

As I was preparing this message I was having a tough time deciding which of today's two gospel readings to use as the basis of my sermon.

The reading from Luke, of course, is Mary's Song of Praise, the Magnificat, her joyful reaction to learning that she will give birth to the Son of God and her pouring out of this joy to her relative Elizabeth, who also is pregnant --- pregnant with the person who will end up being Jesus' messenger to Judea and the world.

That messenger, of course, is John the Baptizer, the earthly cousin of Jesus.

The reading from John is the message that the child to be born to Elizabeth will grow up to deliver the message that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

I think that most pastors would lean toward using the Magnificat as the sermon text, if for no other reason than to avoid repetition. After all, last week's sermon and Lectionary gospel passage from Mark 1 talked about John the Baptizer, so the tendency of most of us would be to opt for Mary's joyful song.

So what choice have I made --- To go the easy way and talk about Mary or to risk repetition by talking about John the Baptizer? I decided to go with both texts because they are linked scripturally and tie the impending birth of Jesus to the start of his ministry about 33 years later. They are both parts of the greater story of our Lord.

Let me put that in perspective for you.

The angel Gabriel was sent by God to bring the good news to Mary that she was to be the mother of our Lord, but that isn't all that Gabriel told her. He also told Mary that her barren elderly relative Elizabeth was six months pregnant. An older woman who was barren and a young virgin were both pregnant through the will of God.

Mary clearly was astonished and overwhelmed and she hurried to Elizabeth's and Zechariah's home to share her good news with Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, the child in her womb leaped for joy. That child was expecting the news, almost as if it knew what the news meant. That child would be born about six months before the birth of Jesus and would grow up to become John the Baptizer, the messenger God sent to be the first to testify that Jesus was the Christ, God incarnate, Emmanuel, God with us.

I was asked some time ago what passage of scripture most stood out in my mind. I replied without hesitation, John 1:1-5. That passage reads, *"¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* (NIV)

Those are the words which immediately precede our gospel passage from John. John 1:1-5 is saying that Jesus and God are one and the same and that Jesus has always existed as God. Further, they say that Jesus came into being in human form as the agent of creation and redemption, as the light of the world. I mentioned to you in a sermon last January the on the door post of our home there is a traditional Jewish mezuzah, a container which Jews often have and which contains the words of the Shema, the traditional Jewish prayer, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One". The mezuzah on our door post contains the words of John 1:1-5, the Christian statement of who and what Jesus was and is.

Our gospel passage today from John 1 is in two parts, verses 6-8 and 19-28. The first part is the gospel writer's statement as to who John the Baptist was and what his mission was.

To understand this, you need to be careful not to confuse the two Johns --- John, the author of the gospel, and John the Baptizer. They were two different people. There were a lot of Johns back then, just as there are today.

John, the gospel writer, is telling us that John the Baptizer "was a man sent from God" and that his mission was to testify to the Light, that is to Jesus, so that everyone would believe through Jesus.

Going back to Mary's song and to Elizabeth, do you see the similarity to Elizabeth's pregnancy and that of Hannah, the mother of Samuel? Both women were

barren and through God's intervention became pregnant, their two sons, Samuel and John the Baptizer, being dedicated to serving God. Both women were assured of giving birth while at the temple and their son's were to be given to God. I don't have time to go more deeply into the story of Hannah and Samuel but you can find it in 1st Samuel, Chapter 2.

After introducing John the Baptist in verses 6-8 of our gospel reading, our text shifts to verses 19-28 and to John the Baptist's actual testimony about Jesus.

Do you remember that last week I reminded you that John the Baptizer dressed in the same manner as Elijah with a coat of camel's hair tied with a belt? Many people wondered if he was Elijah returned.

The priests and Levites were questioning the Baptizer. They asked, "*Who are you?*" He replied, "*I am not the messiah.*" Then they asked if he was Elijah. He said that he wasn't. Then they asked if he was a prophet and he said no.

They were exasperated and then said, "*Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?*"

He responded, "*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord!'*" Smooth out the road. Prepare for the coming of the King.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* gives John's response this way:

"I'm thunder in the desert. Make the road straight for God! I'm doing what the prophet Isaiah preached" referring to last week's road building passage from Isaiah.

John's answers were strong and unequivocal. He was emphatic that he was not Elijah or the Messiah. Why would he be so forceful? Clearly it was because some people believed that he was in fact either Elijah or the Messiah.

John didn't claim any special status or that he was a forerunner of Christ. As he said, he was a voice, a messenger, announcing the arrival of Jesus, the Christ.

He was next asked, "*Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?*"

He answered that he baptized only for repentance of sins, not as a means of forgiveness and certainly not for reception of the Holy Spirit. That was to be done by Christ, not by John the Baptizer. His relationship to Jesus was as a witness, a witness

to one who stood among those questioning him, a witness who did not find himself worthy to untie the thong of Christ's sandal.

John the Baptizer was, in the words of Fred Craddock and others:

... a model for all to follow ... The true Light is in the world, but among the people he is often one they do not know. Some miss him perhaps because they have made looking for the Messiah a way of life, preferring their own desires as to what life will be when the Messiah comes to the responsibilities that follow the confession "The Messiah has come, and it is Jesus." The first great task of a messiah is to bring to an end the search for a messiah.

Even in Advent we witness to the one who already stands among us, who has already come.

Now to the God of all wisdom, who strengthens us according to the gospel, through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. **Amen!**

(Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible)