

Second Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
8 December 2024

Luke 3:1-6

In today's readings, we talk about Messengers. Most particularly, we hear the story of John the Baptist, who appeared in the Judean desert, most likely in the year 28 of our Christian Era. To some in Israel, it would have been very apparent that God was about to do something new, because John was not your run of the mill itinerant preacher. He did not do great signs and wonders, like the prophets of old; he did not preach at the Temple, but rather stayed in the Judean countryside; he did not have a well-polished message, but rather a simple and straight one; he did not compromise with the powers of the day, but rather was undeterred about the preaching of his message, even at the cost of his own life; and finally, he did not call attention on himself, but rather pointed the way to the one who was the truth, the way and the life.

As I think about John this week, I have wondered what makes a good messenger. A good messenger is a person who is able to deliver the message to the right people, at the right time, in the right form, and in its totality. I have met some amazing lay leaders in the Church over the last twenty years. Men and women who are actively engaged in spreading the message of Jesus Christ to their brothers and sisters, even within the context of great poverty, as in the case of the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and most African nations. I have met several faithful priests who, even though they are in charge of nine or ten congregations and work extremely hard to be faithful messengers, they worry a great deal about the financial care of their families. I have met lay leaders who have to walk three hours from their village to a bus stop, so they may be able to take a bus to a Diocesan school once a week to get the necessary theological training to teach the Word of God to their people. I have met lay leaders, who live in mud huts in abject poverty, and yet are filled with joy and feel blessed by God every day. I have seen the profound joy of Christians in some of the most desperate places on earth. They gather week after week to share the message God entrusted them to deliver, fully, directly, simply, and joyfully. And this is the first mark of a good messenger. A good messenger is always appointed by God. No messenger chooses his own path, but travels on a path chosen by God. This is not a profession, but a calling. God calls, equips, and deploys his messengers as he sees fit and for his own purposes.

Responding to God's call to be messengers requires that we give up control over our lives. We cannot say, "I know God wants me to go that way and reach

those people, but I think I will go this way and preach to these people over here. It looks like they have a better golf course, or better churches, or more people of Sunday worship..." A messenger that refuses to go where God himself leads them will ultimately fail to do what God wants them to do. They will become too preoccupied with other concerns, they will become distracted along the way, they will be unfocused and disoriented, and ultimately, they will not reach the people God intended to reach. A good messenger preaches the message entrusted to them. It is not their own word they preach, but the word of God. John the Baptist came to preach a "Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". This was his message. "Prepare the ways for God. Make the streets clear, remove any obstacles that might impede you from coming to God."

The image of clearing roads is also one that fits well for us today. Think about times of floods, perhaps during a big storm. In these cases, you have limited choices: you wait until the waters recede, which may take a long time; you take a risk and drive or swim across, which can be very dangerous; or you find another way to get to the other side. This finding another way often requires that you remove boulders, tree branches, and other debris before you dare drive to the other side. This is exactly John's message: Prepare the road of your heart, make a highway for the Lord, repent of anything that clutters your life so that the Lord may have unimpeded access to your life.

Another mark of a messenger is that they point the way to someone else and not to themselves. John was very clear that he was not the Messiah, but rather he was here to bear witness to the Messiah. His job was to lead others to him, to focus the stage lights on him, to perform a baptism of repentance, to lead others to conversion, to adorn the bride for the groom. When a messenger preaches his own message or points to himself, rather than to the one who sent him or the message itself, they are not a faithful messenger. Their job is to deliver a gift which is determined for God's people. They are not the gift, they are not the message, and they are not the main actor in the drama. They merely point the way, shed light on the main character, and clear any obstacles that might impede the people of God from coming to Christ, the true gift from God for the salvation of the world.

Now, let me say a few words about the recipients of the message. We may not always like our messengers, but we must listen to their message. The message is more important than the messenger. We do not choose the messenger, but rather God chooses them for us. Let me tell you a brief story to illustrate this point. A while back I went to a wedding reception. Seated to my left there was a woman who said to me, "Father, I too was an Episcopalian, but I left when Father Such and Such left. I just loved him and could not get used to the new guy. Such and Such

was a holy man. He was so good he could walk on water. But of course, he never did. That's how humble and holy he was." Seating on the other side, there was another woman who said, "Fr. I was an Episcopalian once and I used to worship at your church years ago. But I left because I did not like Father Such and Such. I just never liked him! I don't know where he is at, but I hope he is in another continent." I did then what a good Social Worker would do: I introduced the two women to each other! Obviously, they had a lot in common.

The messenger is a gift from God to us and we must accept their leadership and be receptive to their message. This is especially important for any clergy who has a difficult time accepting the authority of their Bishop. We must be obedient to Bishops as our shepherds, and we must pray that they will be able to discharge their duties with honesty and integrity, but also with deep love and compassion for God's people. Being a messenger is not an easy job, but our church needs faithful messengers chosen and commissioned by God to point the way not to themselves but to the Messiah; to preach a message that is divine and not of their own making; to go to a people not of their own choosing, but chosen for them by God himself; and to clear any obstacles on the road so that the people they are entrusted to shepherd may come to know Christ in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Now, how about us? Is God calling us to enter into the Messenger business? I believe this is exactly the call God is making today. There are hundreds of people outside those doors who haven't yet come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior. It is our Job to help them get there. Today, I invite all of you to listen to God's voice in your hearts leading you to a deeper relationship with Christ and calling you to prepare the highways for God. Help others get to Christ because he the only truth the world needs desperately.

May Christ continue to bless you. Amen!