

This sermon was written by Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church

A Time for Preparation

11-29-2020

Matthew 3: 1-12

To say this holiday season will be different this year is an understatement. It is a time for sheltering in place and protecting your family, friends and yourself from this pandemic. As much as I would like a sanctuary filled with Advent and Christmas worshippers, I realize that we must distant from one another, so we have decided to broadcast our services. Christmas may be an austere holiday without the usual wrappings of family and friends gathering. Many are cutting back on decorating. Even gift giving will change with most gifts purchased on line and delivered directly. You won't need to wrap them. So our Christmas preparation will be different this year.

God was preparing a world for his son to enter in our time and space. God had a conversation with Mary, "You are a special woman and I have chosen you to give birth to my son." The Scripture says that she was greatly troubled and could not comprehend how this would transpire because she was still a virgin and engaged to be married. The Lord convinced her that nothing was impossible, informing her that even her older relative Elizabeth, who was beyond childbearing years, is now with child. So Mary consented, but I have wondered if she did on the condition that the Lord inform Joseph. Joseph finds out that she is with child and is going to call off the engagement but the Lord speaks to Joseph.

Compared to the people problems, God's preparation for the wise men by aligning stars in the heavens together must have felt easy. Elizabeth gives birth to son, John the Baptist and understands his purpose in life is to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, Jesus. He began preparing himself by living the most straight and disciplined life anyone had ever have lived. He lived in the desert away from the corrupting influences of the city. He wore camel hair clothes that itched, a leather belt and he ate a desert diet, grasshoppers and wild honey. No one envied him but everyone respected him because he preached God's word. They came from far and near to hear him and he told them to prepare for the Lord's arrival. How were they to do this? By repenting and being baptized.

I have had an issue with what John said. When the Pharisees and Sadducees visited, John called them, "You brood of Vipers." But the first time I preached on this text I said, "You brood of vampires." It was difficult to recover from that one. Over the years I have wonder if it makes that much difference, vipers or vampires, both blood suckers. John could have just called them blood suckers to begin with. He was referring to those who suck the joy out of living the religious life because they are only living it superficially. His words were a warning to prepare your life for the presence of the Messiah.

I don't like it because this is not how I was taught to treat an audience. These people have come to listen to John and be baptized by him and he calls them names. It reminds me of a clergy conference I attended where the leader spent the time berating ministers. It didn't feel good even though much that he had to say was the truth. The Pharisees and Sadducees were looking for a blessing and received judgment instead. Then John gets personal. He anticipates their response; that they would claim a special privilege with God because they are related to Abraham. He says that you cannot lean upon your ethnic heritage, or your family tree to place you in a right relationship with God. It would be like a preacher saying to his congregation that it is all well and good that you come from a Christian family and for three generations this has been your church home but what matters is your faith and how you live it. Bear good fruit based on your faith with your life.

So they ask him, "What should we do?" John answers, "repent and be baptized." When we hear the word repent we cringe. It is a word of judgment, an indictment of our behavior. We don't like the word primarily because of its misuse and abuse and the image we have of street corner preachers. But the word repent is a good word that will enhance our lives if we heed it. Repentance means to turn, turn around, go a different direction. The Christian sect, the Shakers illustrated it well in a song, Simple Gifts, "Turn, turn will be your delight, till by turning, turning we come around right." What a message for us and our world, to repent by turning, turning till we turn around right.

John's message may have sounded like the doctor, "If you want to live, stop smoking. If you to feel better eat better, exercise and lose some weight." There is judgment but also help if we heed his advice. We are asked to turn our lives around to get the most out of life. It is not enough just to feel sorry for your sins. John insists that we must live our faith by doing good deeds. So he tells them that whoever has two coats must share one with a needy person. Tax collectors were not to collect more than required. Soldiers were not to extort money or accuse people falsely. In other words, John is demanding that they live justly, fulfill the prophet Micah's command, "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God." Take care of the poor and treat people fairly. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Straighten up and obey the laws of God and then you will be ready for the coming of Christ. Get your life in order. Stop thinking of yourself so much and learn to be thankful for what you have and stop worrying all the time. Think of others, do for others, live for others because the man for others is coming.

I think it is a great time to prepare for Christmas. People are preparing, not just by decorating and such, but look and see what is happening. Food is being given to the hungry. Just as John instructed people to give away an extra coat, this December our outreach project is to assist families in need. Generosity is visible in sharing and caring for others.

This is a time of preparing our lives for Christ's arrival by reordering our priorities and focusing on God, God's presence, God's will, God's word for each of us personally as well as for God's world.