

“Mission Possible”

John 1:6-8; 19-28

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
December 14, 2008

For the second week in a row, the Lectionary takes us to a text about John the Baptist during Advent. You might find this odd, but remember that he is related to Jesus and is mentioned in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. It was John’s mother, Elizabeth, that Mary visited soon after discovering that she was going to have a baby. According to Luke, when Mary entered Elizabeth and Zechariah’s home, the baby Elizabeth was carrying, John, “leaped in her womb for joy.” Early on, Luke connects Jesus and John the Baptist and highlights the significance of their common journeys.

The gospel writer, John, reconnects them in the introduction to his book. He portrays John as the one that prepares the way for Jesus and lays the foundation for his ministry in spite of the fact he never calls him the forerunner or even the Baptist. He described John, the last Old Testament prophet, as the first faithful and humble witness to the light. Even when he was grilled by the religious delegation sent to interrogate him, John the Witness did not waiver. He clearly and boldly declared who he was and what his mission was. You have to be impressed with his self-awareness and disciplined spirit.

Let me tell you what I saw in this text last week that I had never noticed. I was struck by how many times the word “sent” was used. You will find it four times.

John the Baptist was sent by God to prepare the way for the arrival of Jesus. Three times we are told that a delegation of priests and Levites was sent by the Pharisees to the wilderness to inquire about John’s identity and purpose. The main characters in this passage were all sent by someone to do something.

I sense an Advent theme emerging from this text. **Advent is a time for sending and a time when those that are sent are faithful and obedient.** This raises some questions for us to consider today.

What have you been sent to do and where have you been sent to do it? Who will go with you and help you to carry out your mission? What results will occur if you are faithful and obedient? Who has been sent to you with a message you need to hear? Let’s explore these questions the remainder of our time together.

What have you been sent to do and where have you been sent to do it? In one way, all of us would answer this differently based upon the needs around us and our ability or willingness to meet them. In other ways, however, we share common answers to these questions.

Like John, all of us who are Jesus followers have been called to be a witness to the light. We, too, have been sent to help our neighbors understand who Jesus is and the difference he can make in their lives. We are to be encouragers, or as Dr. Walter Breuggemann says, “A community of hoppers.”

How do we do this? There is a variety of ways. We share our faith by telling our story. We live our lives in such a responsible way that others see Jesus in us. We walk alongside those that are struggling and help them along their journey, thereby becoming the presence of Christ through which the Word comes alive to them.

There is another place in scripture where the word “sent” is prominent. You recall the time that Jesus entered the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him and he unrolled it to the place where it is written, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has **sent** me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” Luke 4:18-19. After sitting down he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” Luke 4: 21.

What have all of us who claim the name of Christ been sent to do? What is our manifesto? It is to go to the poor, the wounded and the oppressed and walk alongside them offering encouragement and hope. We've been sent to help those that others ignore and shun, the least and the lowest among us. We have been sent to be the answer to the Advent prayers of those that hunger and thirst after justice and peace. Our mission is to make life better for all people.

Who will help us do this? This is not an easy mission. The needs are overwhelming and we can experience compassion fatigue.

The One who sent us will accompany us on this journey. He promises to provide our needs as we meet the needs of others. Paul was certainly confident of this when he wrote in 1st Thessalonians 5:24, "The One who calls you is faithful and He will do this."

One way He provides support is through a community of believers that walks with us on this common journey. This is especially true at Smoke Rise. Companionship and words of encouragement abound in this family of faith.

"Is not this the purpose of the church," writes my friend, James Brewer-Calvert, pastor of the First Christian Church in Decatur, "to accompany one another on our journeys of faith and hope, of mercy and social justice?"

What will be the result if we answer the call to go and reach out to those that are struggling? The lives of people will forever be changed. Despair will be replaced with hope, doubts with faith, mourning with joy, injustice with justice and violence with peace. Those we help will become good neighbors and reach out to others along their journey. The world will become a better place for all.

There is another benefit that results from being the presence of Christ in a broken world. We will discover what true joy is and why it is more blessed to give than receive. We will find and embrace the real meaning and purpose of life.

Miles Kovacs did. He is one of the featured guests on the new television show, "Secret Millionaire." On this show, a millionaire lives incognito for about a week among the very poor to learn what it is like to live on a pittance. This individual finds those that are effectively and sacrificially reaching out to the least among us and gives them a contribution to help them do their work.

When Kovacs handed out his money, he was overcome with emotion. He thought he would be the one changing others' lives only to discover his life was changed the most. The ability to give to those that are quietly going about their benevolent work day after day brought him more joy than he had ever experienced and reminded him of the highest purpose for living.

"All who would win joy must share it; happiness was born a twin," wrote George Byron. Joy has never been achieved by hoarding.

Let me tell you something else that will bring you great joy and that is listening to those that have been sent to you with a message you need to hear. Who would this be? What are they trying to tell you? Are you listening? Like the Pharisees, are you struggling to hear their message because you are surprised by who the messenger is or you are threatened by him or her?

Let me encourage you to be open to anyone along your path that God may use to speak to you. Find a way during this holy season to listen to the voices of concern, goodwill, hope, encouragement, guidance, forgiveness and peace. Listen to the voices you have been unwilling to hear for whatever reason. Their messages and your response could very well make a difference in the kind of Christmas you have this year.

Let me also encourage you to be a witness to the light as John was. Receive him by faith into your heart and follow where he leads. Become the presence of Christ in a broken world and help those who are struggling. I am convinced that this, too, will make a difference in the kind of Christmas you will have.