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Sermon 6 December 2020  
Advent 2: Somebody's Coming

- Thank you, Pastor Tasha. May God bless the reading of the Word.
- Good morning church, it is a blessing to have you worship with us this morning.
- Well, we heard some BIG news this week. On Wednesday it was announced that the UK had approved the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID vaccine, and that the first jabs would be administered in Scotland on December 8. That's Tuesday. And there are at least 2 more vaccines, one from Moderna, and the other, the Oxford vaccine from Astra-Zeneca, in the queue to be approved and administered.
- I first saw the report about the approval of the Pfizer vaccine from SKY News, but then in pretty short order I noticed that the story had been reported by the BBC, the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, CNN, CBS and many, many others. News like this warranted more than just one announcement—news that the weeks and months that seemed like years that we had waited for some hope that things would change were, it seemed, coming to an end.
- You know, a pandemic is not like a war, or a famine, or enslavement—it is not something that you can simply escape via exodus-- by evacuating to somewhere else where it isn't happening—it is a global condition—a universal threat. And such a condition, such a threat calls not simply for

relocation but for restoration—a worldwide solution to the situation that we have found ourselves in. And when the news arrived that a vaccine had been approved, it was like a ray of light in a dark tunnel, like a glimmer of hope among people in exile.

- But after so many months, some folks had given up hope—some folks had never had any in the first place—some had said that our circumstance, the status quo, the way things had become, would be the way they were going to stay—a new normal, and we had best just get used to the damage that had been done to our relationships, our way of living, our freedom, our ability to worship and fellowship—we would just have to accept our fate and learn to live with the brokenness, the death and disorder. We would not see salvation—we would not see redemption, we would not see the transformation of our lives. Best just to be realistic.
- Others denied that anything had changed—some doubted honestly, some lied outright—said that it was all a hoax—that there was no unseen enemy—that there was nothing from which we needed to be delivered, no danger of contamination or infection—and so the vaccine was just more of the same—more of the scam, more lies, further attempts to control us in some nefarious manner—and those folks, of course, have hindered our progress toward the day when the pandemic and its death and destruction would be behind us—but even though they have been a hindrance, even though they have not helped, still we moved toward the day when things would be different, when things would be restored, when things would be put right

- But still others, in contrast, helped pave the way -- those who had seen firsthand the ones who were dying, who had seen those whose lives and livelihoods had been destroyed, had seen those living in isolation and despair—some folks had faith that things could be otherwise-- those who, as Pastor Tasha said last week, had hope and assurance that things would change someday even though they didn't know all the specifics about how that might work—they are the ones who have been a part of something **bigger than themselves**—they are the ones whose selfless dedication and sacrifices have cleared a path out of this wilderness—and I'm not just talking about the scientists and researchers and public health workers and NHS personnel—I'm talking about every person who thinks twice about gathering with others, who wears their mask, who washes their hands, who is mindful of social distancing guidelines—all of those who do the simplest things to protect those most vulnerable among us until the danger has passed.
- And this week, I am sure that when they heard that good news, when they heard that announcement, their hearts were filled with hope, their faith was confirmed, and they experienced a sense of expectation and anticipation and assurance that this announcement, this proclamation, this big news, was, in time, going to change everything.
- This is the second Sunday of Advent, and on the Second Sunday of Advent we traditionally take time to think about John the Baptist, and his role as the last of the prophets who announce the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the light of the world.

- And so this morning we have heard the description in Mark's gospel of the way that John the Baptist "appeared" in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and proclaiming that **somebody's coming**—that "one more powerful than I is coming after me," one about whom John says that he is not even worthy to untie his sandals-- one who would baptize not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.
- And we find this scenario, this announcement, not only in the gospel of Mark, but also in **all** three of the other gospels—not just the synoptic gospels but in the gospel of John as well—we find this same narrative in Chapter 1 of both Mark and John, and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapters of Matthew and Luke.
- And we of course heard the verses from Luke's gospel as well, and I'm sure you noticed that, as is characteristic of the gospel of Luke, we were given considerably more detail in Luke's version.
- As we know, one of the most noticeable differences between Mark's gospel and Luke's gospel is that Mark, being the first and the oldest gospel—as he calls it himself, the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,"—Mark's gospel has a sense of urgency about it—as if this story must be told as succinctly as possible, because time is of the essence—there is no time for all the details like Jesus' birth, or even, in the earliest version, details of the resurrection and ascension— to me, Mark reads very much like a person who has called 9-1-1 or 9-9-9 here in the UK --Mark gives us "just the facts"—just the information necessary to quickly convey the message that the Messiah has come, and his name is Jesus of Nazareth.

- Luke on the other hand is quite the opposite—his goal is to present an orderly account-- after investigating everything carefully—and so in Luke’s gospel before we get to John the Baptist’s announcing the good news in chapter 3, Luke has told us about several other announcements that point toward the good news that John proclaims. In chapter 1, the angel Gabriel (Luke gives us his name because that’s the kind of attention to detail we expect from Luke)--Gabriel announces to Zechariah that somebody’s coming—that his wife is going to give birth to John the Baptist—then his wife Elisabeth makes an announcement of her own about what’s coming—and then a third announcement is made by Gabriel to Mary, and Gabriel says somebody’s coming and his name is Jesus, and of his Kingdom there will be no end. And then a fourth announcement is made by Elisabeth when she sees Mary, and another by Mary, who says **“my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”**
- This is BIG NEWS. But Luke isn’t finished with the announcements yet—Luke then tells us of the birth of John the Baptist, and Zecahriah’s announcement that his name is John, which gives Zecahriah his voice back so he can prophesy about his son, “you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

- And that's just in chapter 1—in chapter 2 Luke tells us of the announcement of the big news that the angels give to the shepherds, and the announcement that the shepherds make about having seen the Saviour lying in a manger, and the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, who recognise that Jesus is the Messiah when Mary presents him at the temple
- And only THEN, in Chapter 3, does Luke tell us about the proclamation of John the Baptist in the wilderness
- And so if we can determine the gravity, the importance, the enormity, of an event by the attention given to its announcement—to what comes before—then we can surely say that what John the Baptist is proclaiming is certainly BIG NEWS, because it is preceded by announcement after announcement that point to the message that somebody's coming—that something big is about to happen.
- And so it's interesting that even though **Mark's** gospel is a streamlined story, even though Mark doesn't seem to have the time for the kind of details that Luke does, even though Mark is concerned with "just the facts" of the good news of Jesus' life and ministry—even though we might expect Mark to cut to the chase and begin with Jesus' appearance--Mark STILL begins with John the Baptist's appearance and announcement
- And I think this is because the story of Jesus' arrival cannot be told in a vacuum, without mentioning what has come before, without placing what God is about to do within the context of what God has done, and what God has promised, throughout history

- And so in Luke and in all the other gospels, we see that while considerable attention is given to the announcement of what is coming—of who is coming—we also find that in all the gospels the words of Scripture reach back into prophetic history so that it’s not simply John the Baptist who is making this announcement—when we read of the proclamation of John the Baptist, we also hear the words of the prophet Isaiah—the message that “somebody’s coming” springs deep from the well of Israel’s history
- Isaiah 40 is the beginning of what scholars call “second Isaiah,” and marks a shift in the book—a shift from the time when exile is in the future, to a time when exile is a very present experience—a time when God seems far off and silent, a time of anxiety and crisis, a time of loneliness and despair (sound familiar?), and it is in the midst of that situation that we read: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that **she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.**
- This is good news to a people who could use some good news. This is comfort—but the Hebrew that is translated there as “comfort” is less like an analgesic that brings relief from pain, that makes us “feel better” and more like the old King James English “*come fort*”—become strong, **fort**,—be fortified, be encouraged, be strengthened-- buck up, because even though it’s been a long time comin’, a change is gonna come.
- A voice cries out ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

- Now I want you to notice that unlike the Exodus, when God had shown his power by leading his people OUT of slavery, AWAY from the land of their oppressors, by making a way for them to relocate themselves—this highway that Isaiah and John the Baptist speak of is no escape route (*note: Pastor Steve wishes he had mentioned Luke 3:7 here, where John the Baptist basically asks the crowds “who told you to **flee?**”, but he didn’t ☺*)---no, this is the way of the Lord who comes to where his people are and transforms that place, this is the trajectory that God moves in when He comes to change things—we read in verse 10

- 10 See, the Lord God comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him; . . . .  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;  
lift up your voice with strength,  
say to the cities of Judah,  
‘Here is your God!’

- “Here is your God”—isn’t this what John the Baptist is saying? The one who comes after me is one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie, the one who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit—the one who will bring transformation, who will bring light and life and justice and righteousness
- Hear the words that are inspiring John the Baptist’s proclamation as you read them back here in Isaiah--
- 6 A voice says, ‘Cry out!’  
And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’



All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

- In the midst of our weakness, our humanity, our finite spans, our histories—the breath of God moves, the Spirit of God breathes within us and upon us like the wind upon the grass of the field—
- Do you hear the hope, the faith, the assurance that echoes in the words of John the Baptist when he channels these words of Isaiah, this big news, this good news? A mighty revival is sweeping this way. I believe that was the message for Isaiah's audience, for John the Baptist's audience, and it's a message for us today.
- But John the Baptist, through the words of Isaiah, is not only proclaiming good news, he isn't just conveying information about what's coming to those who hear him—there is a command here; an instruction; something to be done —The voice of one crying in the wilderness says what? Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
- The imagery here recalls the heralds who would clear the path for kings and royalty so that their chariots wouldn't be deterred by obstructions like rocks or trees or gullies—and these heralds would prepare the way

- And so I don't think John is just being metaphorical here when he tells those who hear his words to "prepare the way, to make his paths straight."
- And it seems to me that if folks can HELP prepare the way, then they can also refuse to do so—they can also be a hindrance to the coming of the Kingdom
- I think that John is here showing how folks can be a help or a hindrance to the Way of the Lord—now to be clear, I do not think that John is saying that the way of the Lord, the coming Kingdom, the redemption and the transformation that the Spirit of God is working in history can be prevented—I think that like so many prophets before him John is saying "God is moving," and you can either get ready or not—and if you don't, this is what you can expect—
- John says—prepare the way of the Lord—remove the obstacles from the path of the Kingdom---And the crowd asks "what should we do?" and John is clear in his answer: You can bear fruits worthy of repentance, you can be generous with the needy, you can speak the truth, you can stop being greedy—OR you can depend on your tradition, you can claim Abraham as your ancestor and think that makes you righteous, you can keep exploiting each other and lying and ignoring the needs of others—but you better know that you are like trees and God is sharpening his axe—and every tree that doesn't bear fruit will be thrown into the fire—he's got his winnowing-fork in his hand, and he's gathering wheat and burning up the chaff—John is serious about this thing

- We might say as Isaiah did, surely the people are grass, and when the breath of the Lord blows upon it, the fire of his Spirit can fill you and empower you to bear fruit or it can consume you and lead to your destruction.
- On a personal note we might ask ourselves this morning, “Right now, what obstacles lie in the path of the Kingdom, and how might we help to clear the way for the movement of the Spirit, what can we do to open wide the passageway so that our eyes might see the glory of the coming of the Lord?” If there are impediments in our own lives, in our families, in our churches, in our communities—if there is injustice, inequality, unrighteousness, greed, selfishness, inhumanity, pride, apathy, ungratefulness, fear, hatred—rocks and branches and gullies that lie in the path of the coming Kingdom today—John is challenging us to help to prepare the way of the Lord, to make his paths straight, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God.
- I want to remind you that this is the challenge that John is giving to those in the wilderness—this is not a message that has been sent into the inner sanctum of power, this message is not being proclaimed from stately palaces or even from the courts of the temple, it has not been sent into the cradle of wealth and status or political or religious authority—
- Who’s being told to get ready? Not the leaders, not the authorities---no, this is a **GRASS-ROOTS** movement that John is invoking, a GRASS-ROOTS movement--- the Spirit of God is about to move among the crowds of the anonymous and uncredentialed, the unremarkable, those without title, the nobodies, those without BIG NAMES

- This is a point that Luke makes some effort to emphasize at the beginning of Chapter 3, where he tell us WHEN John the Baptist makes this announcement in the wilderness—now remember Luke is the gospel writer who loves to give us specific details, and so while Mark just says in Chapter 1 of his gospel that John the Baptist “appeared”—and that’s all the specific detail we get—and then Matthew at the beginning of chapter 3 of his gospel tells us that John the Baptist came “in those days”—that is, at the same time the things that he describes in chapters 1 and 2 were happening,—and John’s gospel isn’t concerned with the specific time at all, he just tells us that it was **after** “in the beginning,” and leaves us to work it out—but Luke takes great pains to let us know WHEN John appears—but that’s not all he’s telling us at the beginning of Chapter 3, where he writes:
  - 1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,
  - Ok, so we have the names of the FIVE political rulers AND the geographical regions over which they rule—that’s just verse 1--
  - And now Luke’s going to give us the religious leaders at the time
  - Verse 2: during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,
  - So we have SEVEN people in authority—5 rulers and 2 high priests—that gives us a pretty specific time-frame

- But it's not just the time frame that Luke is talking about here, because watch what he does next—During the rule of these 5 rulers and these 2 high priests, the word of God came to—
- Now if you're reading along here you might assume that the next words are going to be the name of one or more of these rulers or priests—because who else is the word of God going to come to, right? Those with authority—those with power—the movers and shakers who make things happen, who get things done—who have influence and gravitas—but wait, what does Luke tell us?
- During the rule of these 5 rulers and these 2 high priests, the word of God came to— John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.
- The word of God came to who? To whom, I guess I should say.
- To John the Baptist. The guy Mark describes with imagery reminiscent of the prophet Elijah by saying in verse 6: Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.
- The guy who looked like some of us do at the end of 9 months of lockdown—you know, a little, well, crazy, I mean if we're honest about it.
- And so Luke doesn't just tell us that the word of God came to this wild man who lives in a van down by the river—ok they didn't have vans back then, but if they had, John would have probably lived in one—Luke also tells us all the people in authority that the word of God DIDN'T come to—all the BIG NAMES, the influencers, the powers-that-be.

- Now why would that be? Is this because God CAN'T use the powerful and the influential? I don't think so.
- I think that these first few verses of Chapter 3 of Luke's gospel remind us that salvation and deliverance and redemption are not provided by the power of these earthly BIG NAMES—that they are not the places God has chosen to reveal Himself – these verses remind us that God that comes NOT to bolster the authority of those in power, but to **lift up the lowly and bring down the powerful from their thrones**, as Mary tells us—to show the futility, the emptiness, the finitude of earthly political and socioeconomic power—power that pales in comparison to what God is getting ready to do, power that is put to shame by the power of the Spirit moving in the lives of ordinary people like the wind through a grassy field—ordinary people like Mary and John the Baptist—
- Ordinary people who at the time no doubt seemed quite insignificant and powerless, in fact, a bit pitiful and strange—a young unwed mother with an unbelievable story and a psychotic religious fanatic who lives in the middle of nowhere—and through a narrow lens this would have seemed an appropriate description of them before Jesus arrives—but not when you consider the BIG PICTURE
- You know, when I think of John the Baptist, I always think of the image of him that was painted by an artist named Grunewald in the 1500s on the altarpiece for the Monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim, France. Sometimes the painting is just called Grunewald's Crucifixion, to distinguish it from his

“Small Crucifixion” because of its size. It’s a big picture, measuring about 10 feet high and wide. In the center part of the painting—it has wings that fold out and a lower piece as well, there’s Jesus on the cross--he is the largest figure in the painting, and below him are the two Marys—the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and the two Johns—John the Evangelist and John the Baptist-- and John the Baptist is depicted on the left side of the crucified Jesus, pointing toward him. John the Baptist’s presence at the crucifixion is anachronistic, as you’ll recall that he was beheaded beforehand, but here he stands, pointing, **in much the same way that he points to Jesus’ coming in today’s scriptures.**

- John the Baptist in this painting holds the scriptures as he points, and behind him is written in Latin ““He must increase, but I must decrease””—that’s from the gospel of John chapter 3 verse 30.
- ~~If you look closely you’ll notice that Jesus’ skin is horrifically riddled with sores, and that’s because the St Anthony monastery served as a hospital for those afflicted by the plague and skin diseases—and Grunewald emphasized Christ’s identification with and salvation for these patients by portraying Jesus as literally sharing in their affliction, and providing hope for their deliverance from the sufferings of plague and disease through faith.~~
- When I think of this painting, and I think of John the Baptist, and Mary, and I think that today we move from thoughts of Hope, which was our Advent theme last Sunday, to thinking about Faith, which is our theme this Sunday, I think of the way that hope and faith are intertwined.

- In the NRSV, Hebrews 11:11 tells us: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. But I think I prefer the King James Version, that says: Now faith is the **substance** of things hoped for, the **evidence** of things not seen.
- I think that faith is about the way things are revealed to be when we look at the BIG PICTURE. When we see Mary and John the Baptist not through the narrow lens of that little span of time before Jesus' ministry, but in the wider context of history.
- And I think faith is about our connection to something that is BIGGER than ourselves and our present situation—I think of the way that mere finite leaves of grass are moved by the wind, the way that insignificant, previously anonymous, powerless people are filled with the Spirit and used for the building of the Kingdom—becoming significant, given names that are remembered, rising in power—I think of folks who prepare the way of the Lord, who make his paths straight.
- We often use size as a comparative metaphor when we talk about faith—so by faith John the Baptist can say “he must increase, but I must decrease,” and Mary says “my soul magnifies the Lord”--we sing hymns like “my faith LOOKS UP to Thee, Thou Lamb of Calvary” and “Oh for a faith that will not shrink,” – and Jesus says that with faith as small as a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible
- But without faith, it's easy to feel hopeless; it's easy to feel insignificant, anonymous, meaningless, trapped, powerless, a slave to the way things are,



- Without faith it's easy to ask the questions that Walt Whitman, the author of *Leaves of Grass*, asks when he writes
  - Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
  - Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
  - ~~Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?) . . . .~~
  - What good amid these, O me, O life?
  - *Answer.*
  - That you are here—that life exists and identity,
  - That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.
  
- That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. Mary contributed a verse that said “my soul magnifies the Lord.” John the Baptist contributed a verse that said “he must increase but I must decrease.”
  
- And we, too, we are called to live lives that contribute a verse that prepares the way of the Lord, that makes His paths straight, that helps and doesn't hinder—that embraces the faith that makes us members of the body of Christ, making a way for the kingdom, a way that doesn't simply offer rescue and relocation and escape, but allows God to transform and redeem the places where we are—and the Kingdom of God is present through the body of Christ until it comes in all its fullness and glory
  
- Let us contribute a verse that proclaims as John the Baptist did, “Somebody's coming. Somebody's coming who's gonna change everything.”