

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

This sounds almost like a repeat of last Sunday’s gospel reading. Then, we read from the first lines of the Evangelist Mark’s gospel: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,” Mark said, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; [he is] the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

Certainly, the lessons that we read last Sunday are worth repeating. We can never hear enough of the message that John the Baptist proclaimed. The message of both evangelists is clear: “Repent! The Kingdom of God is at hand! Make a straight pathway for the Lord.” The enjoinder was to prepare for the Messiah by repenting and turning from the way of sin and death. But unlike the rendering that we heard from Mark’s Gospel last Sunday, today’s account in the Evangelist John’s Gospel has a slightly different twist. It is an important twist, and we must work somewhat to discern it because with this twist, John is indirect. Indirectly, but very significantly, John asks his readers a most important question. The question is, “Who is the Christ that will come?”

John the Baptist understood that there was a great deal of confusion, even delusion in the Jewish hope for a Messiah. Some people thought that the Messiah would be the reincarnation of one of the Old Testament prophets, probably Elijah. Others were insistent that John the Baptist, himself, had to be the Messiah. John’s rapidly spreading popularity and strange, even weird appearance certainly added to this misunderstanding of John and his role. Whatever the expectations, none of them were what God intended. This alone tells us something. The danger, then and now, is that when you have a fixed expectation about how something ought to be, you run the risk of not seeing the reality in front of you. John knew this and John wanted to make very clear not only who he was but also who he was not. John said, very clearly, “I am not the Messiah. I am simply the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Today, with our creeds, with our post-resurrection knowledge, with our reading, our study and our experiences in faith, we think that we know all about Jesus and sometimes we tend to look back with amusement on the beliefs of earlier times. We know, for instance, that the Messiah was not a warrior king, although that was largely the Jewish expectation. Regardless of who the Messiah might be, the reincarnation of Elijah, King David born again, or anybody else, the Jewish expectation and the Jewish hope was that the Messiah would deliver them from Roman occupation, period. That was what they wanted and essentially that was as far as their thinking and hoping could go. It simply was not a part of their mind-set that God’s deliverance would be from themselves, from their brokenness, their sinfulness - from the evil that possessed them, not as Jews but as human beings, for it is human nature to be self-centered and self-focused, and self-focus,

also known as pride, is the root cause of all sin. They were blind to this, just as we often are. In a nutshell, John the baptist set out to open the eyes of mankind.

Because we are Christians and steeped in Christian doctrine, we know that the Messiah was the Son of God, the Incarnate, in-fleshed Word of God, or, in other words, God himself in human form. We know that God took on human flesh to share our human nature, to share our human condition. And then he willingly died for our salvation, so that through faith and acceptance of the Messiah we could be righteous before a just God. God sent his Messiah to become one of us one with us. By his sacrifice for us, our sin and brokenness is set aside and we are redeemed – when we accept him and identify with him as he has with us.

John the Baptist wanted the people to understand what was about to take place, so that they could be prepared to accept God's perfect love expressed in the humanity of Jesus. It is to this preparation, preparation to receive the Messiah, that we are called today. Jesus stands, as always, at the threshold of every person, waiting to be received into hearts of all humanity. God wants but one thing of all human kind, and that is that we should all know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. When that day comes, God's intent, in Creation, will be complete. This is the abiding message of Advent. *Amen.*