

The Bethel Pulpit

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December 10, 2017 – Advent 2



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Text: Mark 1:1-18

Title: It's Ok To Point...To Jesus

Waiting.... and watching. The theme of Advent. Waiting and watching ... in order to be ready to **receive** the One who is to come.

I was in the gate area of the Minneapolis airport recently.... waiting and watching for any sign that we would soon be boarding. I looked around me.... 22 adultsand three children...all waiting.. and watching the screen on their smart phone or ipad or laptop. They weren't watching for **that which would take them where they wanted to go...** they were **watching something else** for other reasons. **No one** was watching or talking with anyone else. It seemed like it was **everyone for him/herself...** everyone alone together. **I wondered what this solitary watching might mean for them as individuals and for all of us as the human community.**

The **call is:** Be awake. **'Be alert' scripture proclaims.** Get ready. ***The watchmen on the heights are crying, Awake, for night is flying, the watchmen on the heights are crying: awake, Jerusalem, at last.*** In today's scripture **Isaiah is awake.** He was watching and responding to **what he saw and felt.** The Spirit of the Lord was upon him. The **Lord had sent him** to bring good news to the oppressed; to embrace the wounded hearts; to say **"You're free"** to those bound up in prisons of resentment and fear, prisons of hunger, homelessness, depression, disease and despair.....and our world is **not yet free of** these imprisoned ones... **is it?**

So what does this word of Isaiah say to us as we face ongoing national issues of critical health care needs, complex tax revisions, multi-racial tensions, routine public shootings, professional conduct violations, deep political divisions, extra-ordinary weather conditions, fears of nuclear war, and the march of physical, mental, and spiritual disease among us all. Does Isaiah have a word for us today?

Yes, **Isaiah was awake.** He reports on "thunder in the desert." Straightening roads, leveling hills, clearing rocks, and hearing a "shout". He was **ready and readied** to receive his **"marching orders"** from the Lord, his God. **How else** could he comfort those in mourning? **How else** could he help the broken ones to build up again where hopes, dreams, relationships, trust, and faith had been dashed into pieces? He was **active in his waiting** upon the Lord's hand to restore His people, to give them **a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.** So where Lord, and how do we moderns engage in this straightening things out; leveling troubling economic disparities; clearing the pathway for truth to regain its rightful place, and "shouting out" a word of genuine hope when hopelessness seems all about us? "Where" Lord..., and "how"?

I was recently with a man whose mother had died about an hour earlier. On a visit with her the day before she died, we had talked about her hands – beautiful hands that had always been ready to serve her husband, her only son, and so many others. As we **awaited those who would come to take her body..**, her son, her sister and I stood in the darkened room and surrounded her bed... the bed where **(at her request)** she received communion 24 hours earlier. In silence **we stood, and prayed and read scripture** and then.... not unlike those who long ago prepared **the body of another** at the Garden Tomb, I **anointed her beautiful hands and then in the sign of the cross, her forehead.** A reminder of the **sign of the cross made upon her brow** three score and ten years before.... in the **waters of her baptism.** I thought of a little boy whose tiny forehead had been **likewise anointed in baptism with the oil of gladness** by his grandfather Tim. How healing those words that also address your life.....***When we were baptized, we were buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised, so too shall we have new life.*** Watch therefore.... **Watch for the Lord of Life...** coming to live with you.... **to give you a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.... no**

matter the losses that touch your life! ...and we live each day with many losses! Watch how you **live your life!** ...how you wait in the midst of your losses.

And so, as **we moderns** seek to embrace this year's **Advent call** to get ready for the **celebration** of God's coming, I invite you to **imagine yourself** as the young pastor whose **mother had asked him** why he was **the only one** of her children who **still went to church**. He answered her by asking her **what she would tell her children – his siblings** – if they asked her why she **went to church**. In short, **why was her faith important to her?** The young pastor reported that what followed was the **most uncomfortable 20 minutes** of conversation he'd ever had with his mother. **Why...**, maybe because **like many adult Christians**, she hadn't been asked to talk about her faith since confirmation. You can imagine that articulating her **reasons for going to church**, let alone **confessing** the importance of her faith, was **incredibly difficult**. But...**she did come out** with a single clear sentence describing what her faith meant to her. To that her son said, **"That was great, Mom. When they ask, tell them that."**

And so I wonder about **our awareness** of those places in our daily living where the situation **literally begs us to address an issue** in the context of our faith? What does **YOUR faith** have to do with the **straightening out**, the **leveling off**, the **clearing out** and the **"shout"** that **you hear from God**? Do you say with Isaiah **"What shall I shout?"** or are you **mostly content** to let others do the shouting out **"for the doing of the will of God?"** John **wasn't kidding...** about the **WORD** he had been **sent to deliver**. Those who had thronged to hear him from Judea and Jerusalem **confessed their sin** and were **baptized into a changed life**. The old was **gone**. The **new had come**. The **real star** in this drama **will change your life**. Are you **ready?** **Do you see the reality** of being new... in your **thinking**, in your **acting**, in your **living** of your life? Your **baptism** has empowered you to change from the inside out. It **is still working on you!** Are you **ready...** and willing... **to be new?** ..to walk with the one who loves you?

Former Philadelphia Seminary President David Lose says that frequently when he visits congregations, he **saves time before leaving to ask people** to turn to each other and **share for a moment or two** why their congregation matters to them... in effect, **"What they have shouted with their lives to declare God in their life."** David said, **"The first time I tried this was with a congregation in Colorado, and on the way out, a man, probably in his middle eighties and stooped somewhat by age, stopped to speak with me. 'I just want to say thank you,' he began, 'because I've been going to church with this gal,' (nodding to his wife who followed close behind), 'for more than sixty years. And it turns out that neither of us ever knew why the other was going!'"**

After 42 years as a pastor and more than 30 congregations served, I am convinced that **any and all congregations** in our **changing church today will live** in this increasingly **unchurched society** and **grow**, in direct proportion to their **willing-ness and ability to talk about why their faith is important to them**. That **talking** is with **family, friends, co-workers, neighbors and those who come unknown**. It is our hope that our new ministry and resource teams can help us all in that **witnessing in the future**. **And, what an opportunity for each of us again this season as we gather with family!**

As you are **aware**, one of the **core values of the Lutheran Church** is that **we are committed** to also **witness intentionally**. So, **not only do we believe** that it is **OK to point to Christ**, as John the Baptist did, but **we believe that it is essential** to the integrity of **who we claim to be** as the children of God. As your **intentional interim pastor**, I am committed to **nothing less than that ministry of pointing to Jesus...** and I **speak not only for my pastoral colleagues**, but also on behalf of **those pastors who have preceded us here** as well as for **those pastors who, in God's time, will follow us**.

God is going to take care to faithfully provide those “future pointers” then .. just as this same God has **done in the present.** And, by virtue of **YOUR baptism** and your **faithful commitment**, YOU are **no less a minister of the Gospel**, a servant waiting upon the babe of Bethlehem, **alert to the living presence** of the Nazareth carpenter’s son, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Wonderful Counsellor, the Prince of Peace **in every corner of your life.**

In this **in-between time** of **active waiting** for Christ in our preparation for his new future **with and for us**, we are first and foremost.. ALL **called to point to Christ**, to witness **intentionally** to his love in **all that we say and do** “as we prepare.” Our **Transition Team** has **enabled us** in our active waiting, in our **practicing of Advent.** They were commissioned **to help us in our active waiting.** We are doing **important transition work ... and it is not yet done.** God needed John the Baptist to help the people **prepare their hearts** for the coming of their Savior. **God needs you and me to do no less!** Advent is work! Preparing for Jesus’ coming **isn’t easy.** But it is **our call.... flowing from the waters of our baptism.** *Once there was a church that was looking for better questions. Now every time they get together, they have the feeling something important is going to happen. If it ever didn’t, someone would be sure to ask why. (Brokering)*

My deepest prayer in this in-between time is that we embrace the opportunity to continue **asking those questions** that flow from your answer to the question, “**Why do you go to church?**” (or) “**What does your faith mean to You?**” It is **the question** that Jesus asked Peter: “**Who do you say that I am?**” **In the Christ child of Bethlehem, he is asking us still!** And now, **may all of our questions point to Jesus....** in **whatever way** we are **able to ask them.** May we hear each other’s questions Lord...and then just rest the question **awhile upon our hearts....** that we might **hear what you** are telling us. Now may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep our restless hearts and our questioning minds resting in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.