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"Breaking the Silence"
Isaiah 11:1-10 Matthew 3:1-12 Romans 15:4-13

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 3:1-12

Last week we began Advent hearing Jesus' warning that we need to live ready and heed our Wake Up Call. This morning we hear from a Wake Up Caller himself, from Jesus' first cousin, John.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for sending John to prepare the way for your son to enter our world. As we examine the role he played in Jesus coming into the public eye, may you open our eyes to see how we too can prepare the way for Jesus to come afresh into our lives and into the lives of others. Open our ears to hear you speak to us, our hearts to sense your touch. In Jesus name we pray. Amen

A husband and wife were having some problems at home. They had argued and now they were giving each other the silent treatment. It lasted all weekend long, it was miserable. On Monday, the husband had an important appointment and needed to break the silence. He was just too stubborn to do that. He needed his wife's help to be at the airport on time to catch a flight, however, he didn't want to be the first to break the silent treatment. So, he wrote on a piece of paper, "Please wake me up at 5.00 a.m."

The next morning the man woke up, looked at the clock and discovered it was 9.00 a.m. He completely missed his flight. He was furious. And he was about to hunt his wife down and read her the riot act for not waking him up. But then he noticed a piece of paper on the bed. There, in his wife's handwriting was written: "It is 5.00 A.M., wake up!" 1) . They needed to break the silence.

There is a lot of silence being broken in our world. There is so much noise in the world today. There are so many voices competing for our attention, especially in these days that lead up to Christmas - music blaring out of every store: impatient customers raising their voices to get the attention of overworked store clerks; the sound of horns and traffic jams. If you really want to be heard in the midst of all this noise, you are probably going to have to shout.

That reminds me of the Salvation Army lassie who was informed by a policeman that a local ordinance would prevent her from ringing her bells to invite contributions. But such a crude law could not stop such an inventive woman. The next day she did a brisker business than ever as she waved one sign and then another in the air. The signs said "ding" and "dong." 2

Can you imagine complete silence? It's hard to in our culture today in which are constantly blaring. But in this morning's text a silence of 400 years is broken. Don't misunderstand me, not everyone was silent during this period. Women and

men were talking. Boys and girls were talking. But for 400 years there was no prophet speaking the Word of the LORD. No one was truthfully saying, "Thus says the LORD..."

The voice which breaks the silence is the voice of John the Baptist, who may rightly be called the last of the Old Testament Prophets. He is functioning as a Herald by announcing the coming of the King. In the ancient world, a herald was one who went ahead of a king's chariot to prepare the road. He would command a crew which would smooth out the usually rough roads of that day by filling potholes and removing boulders. The herald would also go before the king shouting, "Make way, the King is coming!" One commentator noted that such "efforts to make a road level and smooth were restricted to times when royalty was on its way." 3)

Isaiah prophesied that John would come and explained what he would do. Isaiah predicted his coming in the 40th chapter when he said, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who shall prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord ...' "

Some would say that John was a religious eccentric. Others less kind would dismiss him as being simply a flake. Yet, this was God's unlikely servant chosen to announce the spectacular events that would soon follow.

From the very beginning everything about John was unique. His mother Elizabeth was a cousin to Mary, who became the mother of Jesus. Luke 1:15 tells us that John was filled with the Holy Spirit from before he was born. When John was still in the womb of his mother Elizabeth, in about the sixth month of her pregnancy, Elizabeth's cousin Mary came to visit her. Like Abraham and Sarah before her Elizabeth was well past the child bearing years. But through the angel of the Lord appearing to her husband Zechariah when he was serving in the holy of holies, a promise was given that she, in her old age, would have a child. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, Luke says that John was filled with the Holy Spirit and leaped within Elizabeth's womb.

When John started preaching he had it rough. In order to survive he ate bugs. He ate bugs dipped in bug juice *honey. The locusts were probably not what I call locusts. They were probably not cicadas. They were more like grasshoppers. They were either eaten raw or roasted and are quite nutritious and a source of many vitamins. While most insects were considered unclean under Mosaic law, Leviticus 11:22 specifically states that locusts are permitted.

Luke 1:15 also tells us that John was a Nazarite. That means that his family took a vow that from the day he was born that John would never cut his hair or drink wine (the wine might have helped with the locust eating).

When John began his ministry he lived in the desert solitude of Judea, a rugged desert wilderness. Not only was he a teetotaler who had locust breath and hair that wouldn't quit, he dressed in garments of camel hair.

John was rough. He would not be your first choice to invite to "Bring a Friend Sunday." On top of the fact that he was a tee totaling, bug eating, ball of hair covered in camel hair --his message was harsh as his appearance. My friend Alex posted on his Facebook page that he had decided that John was not the kind of person you would want to start a conversation with at an office party. He was always talking about sin, preaching repentance over and over again. He even did that to the king Herod, which eventually led to John's being beheaded. (we talked about that in our study of the book of Matthew small group this morning)

Yet, multitudes of people were attracted to him and believed what he had to say because they were baptized by him. All kinds of people came - tax collectors, soldiers, Pharisees, Sadducees, Temple priests - they all came asking John what to do and they listened to what he told them.

John was sent from God to get people ready for the ministry of Jesus. God prompted people to flock to John so that he could prepare them to flock to Jesus. John's purpose in life was given to him by God. God put him at the right time and the right place to do it.

Our purpose in life is given to us by God as well. God will put us in the right place at the right time. All God expects of us is that we prepare the way for others to hear about Jesus. When we do, God promises to fulfill his purpose for us. God wants us to break our silence.

John the Baptist's goal in preaching against sin so harshly was not to humiliate people, but rather to shake them out of the idolatry of believing in themselves and their good works. He wanted to show them how desperately they needed a Savior. Having convinced them of their sin, he would then be ready when Jesus comes on the scene to point the people to the solution to their sin problem by pointing at Jesus and announcing, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." From John, the people would not only hear about their sin, but also about God's redeeming love, and their deliverance in Jesus.

My friends, if there has ever been a generation that needs to hear and respond to John the Baptist's call it is ours. Our focus is so fragmented. We have been deceived by those who have convinced us abundant living can be measured by how many presents are under the tree. We make dangerous choices. We compromise with culture, inflict on ourselves pathetic attempts at improvement, and chase after every voice that offers us the promise of a better tomorrow.

So John invites us to get ready to receive Jesus. If we are going to receive Christ's coming, we must be made ready by stepping away from distractions and stepping out of the pace and pattern of Christmas as it's celebrated by our culture and turn our focus on receiving Him..

We must not make light of sin. Jesus thought it was serious. In fact, from some of his miracles one gets the distinct impression that he thought it was our greatest problem. In several instances Jesus forgave sin first and then healed sickness. As bad as infirmity is, sin is far worse, because sin kills. It not only kills us, but it was our need for a savior that brought about the death of the only sinless person that ever lived.

John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is nothing less than owning up to the reality of our sinfulness. True repentance is a turning away from a careless attitude about sin. Repentance means turning away from believing that sin is not a problem and confessing that it is indeed my problem.

John fulfilled his destiny. He was fearless in taking on those who opposed him and his mission. He pointed not to himself, but to the One who came to fulfill his destiny to take away the sins of the world.

Yesterday at our Men's Breakfast Tihomir Kukulja told us about his ministry called Renewing Our Minds in the Balkans. He shared testimonies of 5 people from all over the Balkans whose lives were changed by this ministry. One of the people he talked about was a woman who was raised in the Muslim faith. She took on the task of comparing Islam with Christianity. She embarked on her study presumably to point out the superiority of Islam to Christianity. But as she read the New Testament she was struck by the comparison of the God of Islam who was so angry to Jesus who was so loving. In the end she chose to follow the loving Jesus. Prior to her study she had been on the wrong end of the silent treatment. She hadn't heard about the Jesus who loves.

We need to stop giving our world the silent treatment. On Monday night the session voted to designate next Sunday a "Bring a Friend" Sunday. We need your help. Each of you received an "invitation" with your bulletin this morning. We invite you to invite others to come next Sunday to worship and then to stay for our annual Christmas Party after worship. I took some to the Diana Gray Child Care Center when I went to sing on Thursday. I handed out some Flyers Thursday night at the Christmas Parade on Texas Avenue and we were supposed to hand them out Saturday morning, but were rained out. So we have enough for you to take more! Take a stack! In addition to inviting folks you know, you can take some flyers to businesses in the area and ask if you can leave them by the register or post them on bulletin boards.

Through the power of the same Holy Spirit that caused John to leap in his mother's womb and that filled John from before he was born and gave him the

power to fearlessly call others to repent; we too can be fearless in fulfilling our destiny. I can be Jim the Presbyterian. You can be Jimmy the Presbyterian and Betty the Presbyterian and Don the Presbyterian and Ann the Presbyterian and Mike the Presbyterian and Dianne the Presbyterian. We can prepare the way to celebrate the coming of our Lord into our lives and into others lives. We can prepare the way of our Lord to come again. We too can join in the joy of inviting others to join in the joy that came to the world by ...breaking the silence.

Let us pray. Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, since you have walked in our shoes, enable us by the same Holy Spirit of our baptism to proclaim the good news and prepare the way for your coming again so that you may be surrounded by people from all earth's cities and country sides. Hear our thanksgiving for all who have paved the way for your good news to reach us. We admire the bold preaching of the prophets and apostles.

Give us ears to hear and respond to voices are still crying out...in the wilderness...in the back roads...in the main streets of cities...in the back yards of suburbs...in the back alleys of ghettos. Voices crying out, taking up John's call for repentance. Crying out for justice. Crying out for peace. Breaking their silence.

This morning we remember the victims and survivors of the attack on Sandy Hook Elementary two years ago that took the lives of children and their principal. We grieve for the loss that day, but also the 100's of other shootings that have taken place on school grounds in our country since that day.

This morning we remember the victims of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941-- 75 years ago. We remember the hundreds of thousands of lives wounded and lost in responding to that attack.

We pray for those who have answered the call to protect and serve. We pray for those who answer the call to put themselves in harm's way. We pray for those who answer the call to cry out against injustice and abuse. We pray for those who answer the call to mete out justice. We pray for peace every place that it is not. We pray for peace that is not understandable the peace of mind and heart that comes from knowing we are loved by Jesus and called by him to share his love with others.

- 1) Billy D. Strayhorn, God and Sinners Reconciled
- 2) John Thomas Randolph, The Best Gift: Sermons for the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany Seasons, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.
- 3) Robert Mounce, Matthew NIBC, 23).

LEAD INTO BENEDICTION.

A well-to-do woman who is a member of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian church just west of Philadelphia Pennsylvania was asked why she came to church. She said, "I come to worship to pray and to sing and to listen. But most of all, I come for the benediction. Because that is the moment that I am reminded who I am. That is the moment when, one more time, I am pushed by God out into the world to be the very presence of Christ." This is the benediction which is used every week at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church:

Go out into the world in peace;
have courage;
hold onto what is good;
return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak, and help the suffering;
honor all people;
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.