

“Prepare The Way”

Matthew 3:1-17

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TIMES OF TRANSITION

There's a term that has become incredibly popular in certain circles over the past year or two. Or maybe it's been popular for a long time and I've just started hearing it more recently. It's the concept of *liminal space*. There are some variations on how that term is used, but the most common theme of usage and the nearest synonym I could suggest is “an in-between place.” Liminal spaces are sort of like the thresholds between two well-defined spaces.

You and I are taking up a lot of room in several overlapping liminal spaces right now. 2020 has ended, but 2021 isn't really in full swing yet. We're in the middle of what was and what will be. The election is behind us, but the results won't be officially verified until later this week. So the drama of another election is over, but not quite done. A year of global pandemic has passed, and a vaccine is just starting to roll out. But the long-term physical, social, emotional, or economic effects of this pandemic are still totally unclear. Liminal spaces can feel like waiting in limbo, where the world is a little disjointed and eerie and uncomfortable. It's a tough place to live. And if I'm being perfectly honest, it's a weird space to preach in.

In our reading today, the characters occupy their own liminal space. The age of the prophets is past, but the Messiah has not yet been revealed to the world. God has been silent for a long time, though there is hope he will speak again soon. Folks like John the Baptist and the Sadducees and the Pharisees are living a bit like we are -- in the uncomfortable, unknown in between.

The temptation in these spaces is to either stagnate or to run screaming out of them. But in the liminal spaces, the uncomfortable in-betweens, there's an awful lot that God is still doing and a lot for us to do too.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Hopefully by now, you've heard that we're doing a church-wide push to read through the Bible in 2021. On Friday, we started with Genesis 1, which was a surprisingly good complement to writing a sermon on Matthew 3. Genesis 1 and Matthew 3 have something surprising in common with one another. It's *silence*.

The silence is pretty easy to imagine in Genesis -- “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2) In that scene, there is just stillness and anticipation, as the world that is about to be waits for God to create it. There’s no noise because none of the noise-making things have been created yet.

The silence is a little more veiled in Matthew 3. After all, in Matthew’s gospel we’ve already had two chapters packed full of Mary and Joseph and the baby and angels and magi and the murderous Herod. It all seems pretty chaotic and noisy. The world certainly wasn’t still and silent any longer. But all that action covers up the reality that *God* had been silent for about 400 years.

Malachi was the last prophet that God had used to speak to the Israelites, and his ministry ended about 400 years before Jesus’ birth. The fact that God was not speaking absolutely does not mean that God checked out and ignored his people for four centuries. But during that time he dealt with them in a different way, in a way that was less direct. After a 400-year silence, God is getting ready to speak again. This time, it will be to explain the incarnation and to confirm that Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us.”

The way that God sets this scene up is just spectacular. If you were to pick up a Bible for the first time and start reading Matthew 3, this whole scene looks pretty weird. There’s a crazy-looking guy wearing some strange clothes, eating bugs, and dishing out some pretty clever insults (“brood of vipers!”) as he yells at folks to repent.

And for some reason, it seems like everybody’s coming out to see him! Why? It’s because of what God said through the prophet Malachi 400 years earlier. “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:5-6, NRSV)

You can probably conjure up the last words you’ve had with somebody. Perhaps the person died after that conversation, or maybe it was an argument that ended the relationship. Last words tend to stick with us. They shape our memories of the past and frame our expectations for the future. The people of Israel are no different.

For all the ways they have imperfectly followed God and for all the times they have disobeyed his commands, they still believe in God, and they remember his last words. At this point, they’re looking for the return of the prophet Elijah to usher in God’s reign. After all, that’s the last thing God told them. So when John the Baptist shows up, we have a man who is dressed the way Elijah dressed (2 Kings 1:8) and eating the diet the Israelites’ ancestors ate in the wilderness centuries earlier. Everything points to John being the fulfillment of the 400-year-old promise that Elijah was coming back. And that, every single Israelite would know, means something really big is coming!

And so the people start to come - from Jerusalem, from Judea, and from around the Jordan. In ever-increasing circles, word is getting out about John and folks are coming

to see and hear him. And when they get there, he has one central message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 3:2) We’ll come back to John’s message and ministry shortly. For right now, we’re going to jump over John’s interactions with everybody else and focus on his encounter with Jesus.

Jesus comes from the area of Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. It’s important to remember that Christians did not invent baptism. In infant baptism, we are inviting the parents to make promises to raise their children in such a way that the children will one day affirm their baptism (in our tradition we call this “Confirmation.”) In adult baptism or the baptism of older children, we are baptizing as a visible sign that the person being baptized has already made a decision to follow Christ and wants to make a public profession of that commitment. Whatever you think of either of those types of baptism, they aren’t what John was doing.

Many people in the ancient world were “baptized” for a variety of ritual reasons. These ritual washings were fairly common and they were performed in different ways at different places for different purposes. So, we need to set aside baptism as we know it in order to understand this story.

What exactly this particular baptism meant to Jesus or to John or to the crowds gathered around them, I cannot say with much certainty. Two things are clear, though. First, this is not a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, since Jesus did not sin. Second, it was tremendously important. Remember, we’re coming down to the final moments of a 400-year silence. It’s just like that pregnant pause just before God spoke the world into being. God is about to speak again for the first time in many generations.

As Jesus comes up out of the water, God cracks open the heavens, the Spirit comes down like a dove and lands on Jesus. And for the first time in all of Scripture we see clearly all three persons of the Trinity acting together in one scene, and -- after 400 long years -- God speaks. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

God is speaking again. Any confusion we may have had up to this point is gone. Who is the child in the manger? Now we know with complete certainty. Is God still present and active in the world? Absolutely, and more intimately present than ever before. Is the “great and terrible day of the Lord” that Malachi prophesied about coming? Most certainly. And that takes us back to the message and ministry of John the Baptist.

PREPARING THE WAY

You’ll remember that John’s central message was “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 3:2) The fact that God has shown up on earth in the person of Jesus and that God is speaking for the first time in four centuries certainly gives credence to the claim that the kingdom of heaven has come near. There is not much that God could do to bring his kingdom more near than giving us the incarnate Christ to

live and dwell among us. The “for the kingdom of heaven has come near” part is very clear; the command to “repent” is perhaps less easy to swallow.

Calls to repentance in John’s day and in ours do not tend to be very popular. Some of us like telling others to repent, but have trouble seeing our own sins. Some of us are terribly nervous about ever suggesting that another person is less than entirely perfect just as they are, and so we avoid the topic altogether. Some of us are so busy dealing with our own sins and repentance that we forget there’s a world full of people around us. We have a variety of issues, but sin and repentance are tricky topics for all of us. Let me give you a quick “spoiler alert” - we all sin, and we all need to repent!

Specifically in this chapter, John the Baptist is getting very worked up over people in positions of leadership and authority who are unable or unwilling to see their shortcomings, and the role they have in helping others do the same. When the Pharisees and Sadducees (religious leaders of his day) come to check out what John is up to, he greets them with a scathing title - “You brood of vipers!” (7) It’s a colorful biblical insult that conjures up all manner of repulsive images. He’s calling these leaders of his day slimy, slithery, venom-filled snakes. Pharisees and Sadducees don’t come out as the “good guys” anywhere in the Bible, but this is an especially bad start.

When we look at the brief exhortations John gives them, it’s pretty clear that he thinks these leaders are banking too heavily on their lineage. “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” (8-9)

It was a point of national and ethnic pride for the Israelites that they were the children of Abraham. Throughout their Scriptures, God is often referred to as the God of Abraham. He is functionally the beginning of their story and the source of their identity as God’s chosen people. It is of the utmost importance to preserve and protect that identity. But for John, a life of repentance matters more than ancestry or race or nationality.

I don’t think John would say that being a descendant of Abraham was a bad thing, or that there was nothing to be gained by being aware of or proud of your heritage. After all, the gospel of Matthew begins with a lengthy explanation of how Jesus came to be a descendant of Abraham. John’s problem with the Pharisees and Sadducees seems to be that they had put all their hope in Abraham. Somewhere along the way they had decided that by virtue of their identity, by privilege of their birth, they were “in” and could keep a rigid set of rituals and routines to maintain their status. Rituals and routines are not bad things. In fact, they can be incredibly helpful tools to develop and practice our faith. But when those routines and rituals become the object of our faith, we’ve gone off course. That’s what John is railing against.

At the top of your bulletin this morning, you’ll see a quote that I read this week that summed up the work of John the Baptist nicely: “Here is no rabbi, reasoning and giving options; here is no priest, leading ritual; here is no scribe, prescribing adherence to a set of rules. John speaks with a thunderous voice, demanding a new relationship with

God.... and calls for an ongoing and complete change of mind and action." (Grant R. Osborne)

John's top priority is to call people out of a life of routine complacency and into a place of radical transformation. The rituals and rules aren't enough. True repentance is what is required, and that repentance is marked by a life that bears fruit. To drive the point home even harder, he throws in a mess of vivid apocalyptic imagery.

The ax at the root of the tree is ready to cut down trees that don't produce fruit and throw them into the fire. The one who is greater than John (who you and I know to be Jesus) is said to baptize with fire. The wheat and chaff will be separated and the chaff burned up in the fire. In each case, we can be sure John's original audience would have certainly thought of the fires of Gehenna, which burned day and night just outside Jerusalem.

Make what you will of all those fire images, but what I see in them is the intense urgency of John's message. He knows that the world desperately needs to recognize its sin, repent of those sins, and renew its relationship with God. He knows that he is not the center of this transformation. He knows that he has an important message, and he will stop at nothing until that message is proclaimed. And John also knows when it's time to get out of the way. His job is not to be the way, it's merely to prepare the way and point to the way.

THE SILENCE & THE WAY

The fair question you might ask is what in the world this all means for us today. We're not Pharisees and Sadducees, and most of us don't know anybody who is. It's pretty unlikely that any of us are moving into the wilderness any time soon to feast on bugs and wear camel-hair frocks. And though some of us could turn into street preachers, I know enough of you well enough to know that's not where most of us are headed.

The specifics have changed quite a bit, but I'm not convinced that the core of what's happening in this passage has changed all that much in the past 2000 years. We just finished the season of Advent, when we relive the expectation and anticipation of the birth of Christ. That's the historical level of Advent. But on another plane, we live through Advent recognizing that we are still waiting for Jesus' return. The Israelites had a 400 year silence; we're living in a 2000-year invisibility. Just like how God didn't stop being real to the Israelites during the silence, he hasn't stopped being with us just because we no longer can physically see Jesus walking around in the flesh. But that sensory separation should remind us constantly that we are still waiting for the fulfillment of the promises of God. For us Christians, the last words of Scripture that we have are in Revelation 22:20-21: "He who testifies to these things [Jesus] says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."

We occupy liminal space in a transitional time. 2020 is behind us, and 2021 is waiting to unfold before us. More than nine months of a global pandemic are in the rear view mirror, and both vaccines and virus variants lie ahead. Our nation has just come through a divisive and tumultuous election, with some segments of our nation celebrating and feeling hopeful for the future, while others feel deeply betrayed and cheated by “the system.” And folks on both sides of all those aisles and more are living with some pretty crazy mixes of uncertainty, hope, fear, relief, and anxiety about what lies ahead. If ever there were a time to take the opportunity to redirect the attention of our family, friends and neighbors away from the preoccupations of their daily lives and toward the eternal hope, peace and love of Christ, wouldn't it be now?

It is so easy to get deeply enmeshed in the cares and concerns and disagreements and fears of our daily lives and miss what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the fierce urgency of now.” John the Baptist felt it. MLK felt it. And we need to feel it too. Whatever your perspective on medicine or politics or the economy or whatever other topic is occupying your attention right now, we must remember that we are heralds of the gospel of Christ. We have the most important message in the world, and the message that the world most desperately needs to hear right now.

Our job, just like John the Baptist's, is to prepare the way. Preparing the way looks like clearing the path of any stumbling blocks, and then pointing to that path. Clear it. Point to it. That's it. It's not our job to invent ways to get to God -- Jesus took care of that. It's not our job to determine who should or should not be granted access to the path -- God's been pretty clear that he's in charge of final judgement.

We are called to look at our broken world with genuine empathy and concern and say again, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It's a universally true message that Christians have often cluttered up. Every person everywhere, you and me included, needs to hear the same thing: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” The message is not, “good luck trying to repent, because you've done some pretty awful sinning.” It's not “repent, all you fools who voted differently than me.” It's not “repent, all ye who wear not thy mask.” Repentance is not a tool for us to use to make people think or behave the way we do. Calling others to repent doesn't mean “you need to get right with me.” Our message is “we all need to work on our relationship with God.”

When we repent and when we invite others to do the same, we confess that whatever rules and rituals we follow, whatever “credit” we might have to our name -- they are nothing compared to the abundant grace of God through Christ Jesus. We will never behave well enough or get the formula for righteousness perfected on our own. We are sinners through and through. And so we acknowledge our sins. We repent. We cling to Christ. Through him, we live lives that produce good fruit in keeping with repentance. And we say over and over again to whoever in our broken and hurting world will hear us -- “Let me show you the way. It's not *my* way. It's not about *me*. I'm screwed up too. But let's take a walk, and see how God shows up.” Amen.