

Signs of Christ's Coming: A Voice Cries in the Wilderness

Malachai 3:1-4, Philipians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-18

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Pastor Judy Bangsund

Well, Thanksgiving is behind us and signs of Christmas have sprung up everywhere. Most, of course, is retail-driven: Christmas trees and displays, Santa in the malls, lots of lights. These signs may not have anything to do with Jesus' birth; in fact, that event is largely absent. But we are, undoubtedly, in the Christmas season. You can't ignore the signs.

Last week we began the season of Advent, which has signs of its own. This season is mostly church-driven. The Advent wreath with its 4 candles. Advent calendars, Advent songs. We heard of the sign of the fig tree; a reminder that just as you can tell the seasons when the fig tree puts out its leaves, so you can tell the signs of Christ's coming. It's a sign of hope. Today we hear another sign: the sign of a voice crying in the wilderness. The voice of John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ's coming. Calling for repentance, a change of direction. Calling for a change of heart.

It may surprise you to hear that John was the last of the Old Testament prophets. Yes, he pops up in the New Testament. But his style, his message, his roots are sunk deeply into the Old Testament. The prophets (as a group) warned people against empty pious rituals, rituals that did not change their hearts, rituals that did not bring justice. They spoke out against idolatry, anything that would take the place of the one true God. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament -- in the Christian Bible. It may surprise you to learn that the Jewish Bible ends with 2 Chronicles -- same books, just a different order. But it's an important detail -- where your Bible ends leaves you with a very particular message. For the Jews, the last words are a call to return to Jerusalem. For Christians, it's a prediction that Elijah will return -- or one very much like him -- preparing for the Day of the Lord. So the Jews celebrate Passover shouting, "Next year in Jerusalem!" Christians, however, look to coming of Christ.

After Malachi, there were 400 years of silence. Between the Old Testament and the New, no prophet brought the Word of the Lord. It felt like God had stopped speaking altogether. But finally, a new voice was heard. As prophesied, it was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." The voice of a man who bore some similarities, both in dress and in style, to the Prophet Elijah; a man who came to be known as John the Baptist. It was a sign of Christ's coming; a prophecy fulfilled. And John preached repentance.

John picked up pretty much where Malachi left off. He warned people against pious displays that were no more than skin-deep. He called for true justice, laced with mercy and kindness. He had no patience for the Pharisees and other religious leaders, or anyone who did not practice what he preached. He called them a "brood of vipers."

Now, this was *not* what the people expected. Of course, they knew about the Day of the Lord. It was when God's chosen one, the Messiah -- or Christ -- would come to set things to rights. When evil would end, and the evil-doers would be wiped out. It was a day of hope for the Jews, a day of vindication for them, because *they* were the oppressed -- and on this day their oppressors

would get their comeuppance. Jews expected the pagan nations to bear the brunt of God's anger, especially the Romans. But John rounded on his fellow *Jews*, God's own people – and especially on the religious leaders. And who actually responded to John's message? Not the leaders. It was the tax-collectors, the soldiers – they were the ones persuaded of their sin, who asked humbly, "John, what shall we do?" John told them to act with justice and kindness and then he baptized them, a baptism of forgiveness. A baptism that truly prepared them for the Day of the Lord, giving them real hope, real joy.

So, where does this lesson leave you and me today? Perhaps not in good company. As God's people, as Christians and church members, we could find ourselves in the same boat as the Pharisees. The history of the Church, as you know, isn't exactly squeaky clean. Historically, the Church is guilty of the Crusades and the Inquisition. Later, the Lutheran church, in particular, stood by in silence while Hitler took over. As Church people, we may also wear the shoes of the outwardly pious, the hypocritical and the judgmental. We live in an increasingly anti-Christian world, and these are some of the reasons. Some serious soul-searching is in order. It's humbling. We have to take the call to repentance to heart. The warning is for all. It's for you and me.

So let's take a closer look at repentance. Repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry." In the Bible, the word *repentance* means turning around; it means a change of heart. It means going the opposite direction. A business man explained what this looked like. He said, "Imagine you are walking to work. Your destination is ahead of you. You have walked this path many times before, and you know what you will see on your right and on your left. But one day, you decide to return, to go back home. You turn around. Now your former destination is behind you. Everything that used to be on your left is now on your right and vice versa. It all looks different. Everything is opposite from the way it was before. You have a new destination, and you walk firmly toward it." That's repentance. It's turning around and going the opposite direction.

My friends, Jesus *will* return. There will be a Judgement Day. How can you prepare for that? It not just a matter of adding more good deeds to balance out the bad. It's not that simple. It begins with humility. You look at your life and say, "My priorities are wrong. I'm messed up. I don't want to live like this any more." And then you ask God to turn you around. It's a total make-over. Repentance involves head, heart and hands.

What's in your head is your beliefs. Now, the Church has always been careful about its teachings, keeping doctrine pure. That's what the Creeds are all about. Making sure that what we understand to be true has not been watered down or compromised – especially the core beliefs. Especially beliefs about Jesus, the cross and the resurrection. When you are called to repentance, start with your head. Examine your beliefs. Do they square with Scripture? Because it's not about what you think or what your neighbor thinks. It's about what God says is true. Because he should know. He knows what is wrong with this world. He knows how to fix it. That's what you should pay attention to.

Start with your head. But repentance can't remain in the head. It's not just a matter of what you know and understand. Repentance must filter down into the heart as well. Jesus said, "Where your heart is, there is your treasure." Feelings are what motivate you; they drive your actions.

So – do you have a desire for God? Do you want to know him and to do his will? Is that right up there on your priority list?

I know a pastor who calls himself a Christian hedonist. His name is John Piper, a great preacher from the Minneapolis area. Now, a hedonist is someone who pursues pleasure. It's probably fair to say that we live in a hedonistic culture. A Christian hedonist is a person who finds his highest pleasure in Christ and pursues that. John Piper learned to desire Christ during his doubt-filled days as a young seminarian, back in the 60s. He said, "When I was out of love with the church, and, like an idiot, wondering if the church had any future, I went to Ray Ortlund's church in Pasadena. Sunday after Sunday I watched this man in the pulpit love his God, love his church, love his ministry, and summon people into his loves. And everything in me fell in love with the Church. Here was a man who so manifestly exulted over the Word of God, so manifestly exulted over the Church of God, and over the ministry God had called him to. How could you not want that? He was so happy in his ministry and so loved his God. I wanted what he had." John Piper, today, is a man who desires God.

King David had a desire for God. Many psalms express this passion. From Psalm 73:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Or from Psalm 24:

One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.

It's almost embarrassingly passionate. This same passion leaks into our hymns and worship songs; into our prayers. (Songs and prayers are heart-language.) My friends, do you have a passion for God? Do you desire him? Examine your heart, as well as your head. If your repentance remains in your head, it'll never get any further than your thoughts. But if it moves to your heart, you will be motivated to act.

Which brings us naturally to the next step. Head to heart to hands. Theologians who never act on their beliefs are no better than the Pharisees. But if you believe in God, if your passion is to please him, then you will naturally seek ways to put your repentance into motion.

It also works the other way around. Sometimes actions shape our emotions. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as you do this, you will find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less." As Lewis notes, it works both ways. Passion certainly motivates your actions. But sometimes, actions also lead to passion.

All three are important: head, heart, hands. Belief, passion, action. All three are important and work together. As you repent, consider what you believe. Measure your beliefs against

Scripture. Put your heart into it, seeking and desiring God. Then act on it. Repentance is a matter of belief. It's a matter of heart. And it leads you to change your direction.

What are the results? Hope. Joy. Today we read from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Paul is talking about the Day of the Lord, as did Malachi, as did John. But Paul now calls it the Day of Jesus Christ – and he views it with hope, with expectation, with joy. Paul can do that because unlike Malachi and John, Paul lived on the other side of the cross. Paul knew of both cross and resurrection and was confident that God would complete his good work in Christ, the work of salvation. He knew that God would not look at the account book on that day, counting up good deeds vs bad ones. (*That* would be a losing proposition.) Rather, God would look at the Book of Life, and find his name in there, as one of those for whom Jesus died.

I have a friend whose father died recently at the age of 93. He'd been a faithful Christian all his life. At the funeral, they read his Confirmation verse, from Revelation 2:10: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown." My friend teared up as he repeated those words, knowing his dad had now received that crown. For him, the Day of Jesus Christ has already come. His joy is now complete.

But my friend didn't stop there. He is an engineer, a consultant in Oman. He works with people who are far from Christ – some who are western secularists. For them, the grave is the end. Others are Muslims, who believe in Heaven but have no assurance of it. (Did you know that?) They believe that they will be judged by two angels, one standing at the head and one at the foot of their graves. They have no assurance that their good deeds will outweigh the bad. So his secular friends fear the grave, which for them, is the end. His Muslim friends fear it because that is their Judgement Day, and they don't know the outcome. My friend wants to share Christ with these people, that they too, can experience his assurance, his hope, his joy.

Dear friends, the signs of the times are all around us. Jesus will surely come again. Read the signs; don't ignore them. Repent with your whole being: head, heart and hands. Trust in his mercy, won at great cost by Jesus on the cross – for you. Rejoice in the assurance of your salvation. And take every opportunity to share that joy and hope with those who have none – because of God's great love and desire for you.