

“What Really Matters”

It's wonderful to be here with you on this Family First Sunday. We really have been blessed by the staff we have had here over the years and (I know I'm not alone) in saying that our staff has been also blessed to be able to serve with you in this faith community.

Let's get right into it today. Today we are in the second week of this season in the church year known as Advent. Advent is a time when we prepare to celebrate the birth of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and when we look forward to that day when he will return again.

In this second week (each year) we come face-to-face with a familiar character, a man by the name of John the Baptist. John is often thought of as the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was the first voice of God, (in the New Testament), after nearly 400 years (of silence) since the last time God had spoken (to the people) in the Old.

We just read John's story. (We know how it plays out.) He hung out in the desert. His clothes were made of camel's hair and a leather belt. His diet consisted of nothing more than locusts and wild honey. And his message was straight and to the point.

There was no time for beating around the bush. There was little time (if any) for things in life that don't finally matter. Trivia (for John) was nothing more than trivial. Jesus was about to appear. As a result, all that mattered to John were the things that mattered to God. And all that mattered to God were the things that really matter for us.

Let's talk about what matters to God and (for that matter) what really matters for us. With only three weeks left until Christmas, the birth of God's Son, if ever there were a time to think about what matters, now would be a good time.

All that mattered to John were the things that mattered to God. What was God's message to us? What did God, through this first century prophet named John, want us to hear?

There are a number of things that stand out in his message. The first is obvious. He said, "Turn from your sin." He said, "Turn from your sin." The Son of God, the Creator of the world, is about to be born. He's going to be here (with us); it's time to turn from your sin.

That was John's sermon. That's all there was. Eight words, and it was over. He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

Let's talk (for a moment) about repentance. It's one of those "churchy" words. (It doesn't come up too often.) You don't go to the gym and find people talking about it. You're not going to find encourage for it in the local coffee shop or at the mall. You're only going to hear it when you come to church, when someone like John brings it up.

To repent means to "turn around." It means to stop what you're doing and start doing something different. It means if you're doing this, then you need to do that. If you're doing that, then you need to start doing this. But not just this and that as we (in life) see fit, but that and this as it all (in life) needs to fit.

When John said, "Repent", he wasn't just talking about making a change in life. We're good at changing things in life. This valley is all about changing things in life. If you don't change in this valley, you'll be left behind. Things are changing all the time.

When John talks about changing, he wasn't just talking about changing. He was talking about changing (in life) what really needs to change in life. Our sin. The things that separate us from God. Your sin. The things in (your life) that stand in the way of the life God has in mind for you. (John was serious.) "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Now it starts sounding serious.

As a pastor, I see it all the time. In fact, it's interesting, how, when the conversation turns to heaven, no matter where (and when) it happens, how people seem to straighten up. If what's at stake are things eternal, almost everyone has an interest in what's at stake.

It's the old "If Jesus were coming back tomorrow, what would you want (or need) to do (in your life) today?" We all have our list. We all have things we know are not right. There's not one of us, including myself, that wouldn't straighten up and (make things right) that are not right, if tomorrow were the day.

But what if tomorrow was not the day. What if today was the day? What if Jesus' return (when this is all over) was still a long way off, but his presence and his appearance (here and now) was here and now? Would that change things for you? Would that change the urgency (in your life) in what needs to change in your life?

When John preached that sermon, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near," he wasn't thinking about some far off-in-the-distance future event, about what's going to happen when the world comes to an end and Jesus returns. (Not at all!) He was thinking about the present, about the here and now, and about the fact that (the arrival) of this Jesus, who had been promised from (centuries before) by all of the Old Testament prophets, to be the Savior of the world, was only moments away.

That's what this season is all about. That's the Advent question for us. You tell me. (This is serious.) Are you ready for Jesus when he returns? Are you ready for Jesus, now that he is here, in your life, right now?

This isn't some hypothetical, someday it's going to happen, and so you need to be thinking about it before it does. That's not what this is at all. What it is is what it is. Jesus is here and he is among us, and we're only a few days away from celebrating his birth. Are you ready for that day when it happens? Are ready for that day (when you'll stand before Jesus) today?

"What Really Matters." Advent is a time to turn from your sin. It doesn't matter what it is. It's time to turn away. It's also a time to show that you care.

Now, there's a good question. Do you really care about Christmas? (That might sound like a strange question.) I know you "care" about Christmas. We all "care" about Christmas. But do really care about Christmas? Do you really care that Jesus is here to stay?

That's the question John asked of those religious leaders, those Pharisees and Sadducees that had come out into the desert to see what this was all about. It wasn't his main message, but his main message set it up.

On a certain level, they all cared about Christmas. They all cared about the coming of this one called the Christ. If nothing else, they were curious.

Do you remember what he said? Do you remember what John called them, these religious leaders? He called them a "brood of vipers." (He said), "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? (He said), If you care, then "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." In other words, if you say that you care, then do something that shows that you care. If you don't, then you really don't.

Sounds (a lot) like the book of James. Don't tell me you have faith (in your life) if there's nothing (in your life) to show. If you have faith, then let it show...and if it doesn't show, then maybe there's no faith?

Those were hard words for those religious folk (back then), who claimed to be leaders in the church. Those are hard words for us religious folk (today), who claim to be leaders and followers of Christ.

If you care about the coming of Jesus, then show that you care about the coming of Jesus. And I don't mean, then make sure you have all your presents picked out, and all your cards sent, and you put up your lights. John doesn't tie (our caring) about Jesus to what we do (on the outside) with all of those things. What he does is he ties it to what's happening on the inside, in light of our repentance, and how it all shows up outwardly in how we live.

What's changed in your life because of Christmas? (That's what John's asking.) What's changing in your life because of Christ? That's what bearing fruit is all about.

Tie the two together. It's simple. If the change you need to make (in your life) has to do with your willingness to forgive, then the fruit (God wants to find) in your life is the fact you've actually forgiven. If the change that needs to happen is in one of the relationships you have in your life (that isn't right), then make the changes in those relationships that will make them right. But don't say you care (about Jesus being here) and his return, if you're not willing to change the things (in your life) that need to change, because he is.

"What Really Matters." Turn from your sin (John says). If you care about Jesus, then start living as if you care. And don't be presumptuous in your faith. Don't think that for whatever reason, there's reason for you (in your life) to somehow think that your life is the exception.

Now, John didn't say that in his message, (at least not in those words), but he implied it in what he said. These religious leaders, they thought that because they were Jews, (they were Jewish), they had an inside track. They were children of Abraham, descendants of David, and so they presumed (because they were) that everything (in their life) was right with God.

Do you remember what John said? “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee, start producing fruit.” (Do you remember what he said then?) He said, “And do not think you can say to yourself, “We have Abraham as our father. I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”

In other words, don't be presumptuous. Let go of your presumptions, let go of the things you think are yours because of who you are. You are who you are only because of God. And it's only because of God that you have any chance of becoming anything more.

As a result (John says), you are not the exception in this life. You are not the one (in your relationship with God) who can live and act by some other set of rules (or standards), and think that it's all going to be right (with God) because you (in your life) are the exception to the rule or the standard. Let go of your presumptions (he tells us), because you're not.

Do you think people have presumptions today about religion? Do you think people are presumptuous when it comes to their relationship with God in Christ?

To use John's words, and you decide (for yourself) if this fits in our world today, (John might well say), “Do not presume to say to yourself...any religion is OK, because (after all) we are all following the same God and all paths lead to the same place.”

Or, “Do not presume to say to yourself...I know the commandments are important and I know they are there for a reason, but God understands my life and what I do (in my life) is between me and God.”

Or, “Do not presume to say to yourself...My sins are not as serious as those of others. I'm above average in my morality, so if God's going to save someone, then certainly I'm (one of those) that's going to be saved.”

Or, “Do not presume to say to yourself...It doesn't really matter what I believe, as long as I'm sincere (in my beliefs).”

Or, “God doesn't really care if I go to church, because he's knows what it's in my heart, and that's all that matters.”

Or, “So what if I don't read my Bible,” or “Who really cares if we share in the sacraments?” or “What difference does it make if I act in this way or in that way?” and on and on it goes, and off and off we go, thinking and acting and (trying to convince ourselves) that we are the one exception to the rule, when we are not.

“What Really Matters.” If John were here today, his message would not have changed. Turn from your sin. If you care about Jesus, then start living as if you care. Let go of your presumptions. Stop thinking (in your life) that somehow you are different. And then, finally, and fully, cling to Christ.

“I baptize you with water (John said), for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

When John arrived on the scene, it had been 400 years since the last of the Old Testament prophets. There was a long period of silence between the last word God spoke in the Old, and the first words he offered in the New. But when John came, it was to point the world to Jesus. When John spoke it was to prepare (and to pave) the way for Christ.

And so, let me close with this. Today (at our 10:30 service), two of our students will be publically confirming their faith in God. They will be offering the same confessions and making the same promises as their parents offered and made for them when they were young. In so doing, they will join a long line of followers, a long history of believers, who have come to know and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

When I think about what really matters in life, there's nothing more important than the confession of faith that these two students will make, and that each of us make, as we commit ourselves to Jesus and live each day in him. And the reason I say that is because that's exactly what God had to say, what God wanted us to hear, when he spoke (long ago) through this man named John.

My friends, it's a familiar message today, coming from a familiar Bible character, leading to an event that we all know well. It's not that far off. Three weeks until Christmas. It's not some future event. Jesus is here, and he's here to stay.

And so, don't put it off. Turn from your sin. Show that you care. Let go of your presumptions. And cling to Christ. “What Really Matters.” Amen.