

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Do You Hear What I Hear: Looking for God”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

What were they supposed to be looking for? What were they supposed to see? The people listening to these words from the prophet were beaten down, exiled, oppressed and far from home. Everything they had known had been destroyed. They were lost and without hope. Into that moment came this prophet saying a bunch of strange, and frankly, absurd things. The Jewish people have served their term of exile. Someone is supposed to go out and make a highway for God, tearing down mountains and filling in valleys. The people are supposed to see the glory of God; and not only the glory of God, but the power of God like a mighty arm. Finally, God will care for them like a shepherd cares for his sheep. All of this was a bit over the top considering the people were captives in a foreign land. So, what was it that they were actually supposed to be looking for? What was it that they were supposed to actually see?

What were they supposed to be looking for? What were they supposed to actually see? The people listening to these words from this strange guy named John were beaten down, in internal exile, and far from the spiritual home that they had once known. Everything they had known, trusted and believed in was slowly vanishing. They were becoming lost and without hope. Then along comes this guy in his Daniel Boone wannabe costume, eating bugs and saying things like, “One who is more powerful than I am is coming. I am not worthy to even serve him. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. So, everybody come to the river and get baptized.” All of this was a bit over the top. All of this was extremely vague. What then were they actually supposed to be looking for? What was they were supposed to see?

What are we supposed to be looking for? What are we supposed to see this Advent season? This week’s Advent theme is, “Looking for God.” So, what are we supposed to be looking for? Unlike those who first received these messages, we are not beaten down, oppressed, lost and without hope. This is not to say that our lives are perfect, far from it. Many of us this morning are struggling with cancer, the effects of aging and disease, issues with parents, children, friends, relationships. Many of us are struggling with job issues and addictions, politics and finances. Yet, even with all of that we are a free people, living in a time of abundance unheard of in the history of humanity. We not only have enough, but we also have enough to share, which you all have done in so many ways throughout the year. What is it then, that we are supposed to be looking for? What is it that we are supposed to see?

What are we all supposed to be looking for? What are we all supposed to see? The answer is simple and yet extremely complex. What we are looking for is another chance to become the people of God. Let me explain. The people who first heard the prophet and went out to be baptized by John were in the situations they were in because they had forgotten how to be the people of God. The people who were listening to the prophet had forgotten how to treat the poor and oppressed. They had enslaved their

own people. Greed had overtaken them. And their pride was so great that when the Babylonians showed one moment of weakness, the leaders decided that God was on their side and would protect them from their own bad choices. And even when Jeremiah the prophet told them not to rebel, but they did and they lost everything. The people coming out to see John the Baptist were under the thumb of the Romans because their leaders had forgotten that God called them to be humble; to be servant shepherds. And so instead of working together to lead the people of God, they had fought and wared among themselves to the point that each side in their dispute went to the Romans for help. But the only help they got was when Rome helped itself to their nation and all freedom was lost. And with the coming of the Romans, more and more people forgot what it was to be the people of God and simply went with the flow of the Empire. What the prophet and John were asking the people to look for was another chance, another opportunity to be the people of God.

This is what you and I are to be looking for as well; another opportunity to be the people of God. Though we are not in the same place as those who first heard and lived these stories, my guess is that most of us can look at our lives, whether it was this week, or some time in our past, and acknowledge that our thoughts, words and actions were not representative of what it means to be part of the people of God. Perhaps it could be as simple as misplaced anger, gossiping about someone at work, choosing not to help someone that we could have helped or ignoring the needs of someone close to us. Or it could be as complicated as abusive language or actions, or perhaps a refusal to share what we have been given. We can also look at this in terms of our community. We can see where the church has not always been as welcoming as it ought. Where it focused only on its own needs and not the needs of others. Where it failed to speak for the poor, the weak, the abused and the marginalized. It is in these moments, in this moment that we are called to look for another chance. We are asked to see that God is coming toward us offering an opportunity to try again.

Another chance is what they were supposed to be looking for because that is what God does; and what God did for them. In one of the great comebacks of all time, the nation that had devastated the people of God was itself devastated by the Persians, who not only let God's people go home, but sent with them funds to begin rebuilding their nation, Temples and lives. God gave God's people another chance just as the prophet said God would. God gave the people living under Roman rule another chance as well. God sent God's only son into the world to establish an alternative kingdom; a kingdom based not in power, but in servanthood; not in hate but in love. In that kingdom, many rediscovered what being God's people looked like and eventually they would help to transform the world. God gave them another chance. And this is what God does for us as well. That same Christ who lived, died and was raised offers us another chance; through forgiveness of sins we are offered another chance to forgive and be forgiven; to serve rather than be served; to build up and not tear down; to help and not to walk on by. Each day, a new chance comes to us, to live and act as God's people.

This morning then let us look for that other chance that God offers us to live as God's people. My challenge to you this morning then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I taking advantage of the "another chance" that God is giving me to live as one of God's own people?