

“Blazing a Trail for Christ”

Isaiah 40:1-11, 2 Peter 3:8-14, Mark 1:1-8

Advent Sunday 2-B, December 10, 2017

Most of you probably know what it is like to be at a major airport during the holidays. There are cars piled up everywhere in big traffic jams. You can't even get up to the curb during these final weeks before Christmas.

So, let me tell you about this one woman who went out to the airport to pick up some friends who were coming to visit her at Christmas time. She could only get her car as close to the curb as a block away; but blessed with good eyesight she could see her friends standing out there at the curb.

So, what did this woman do? She got out of the car and hollered out loud: “ALICE, KATHY, OVER HERE, OVER HERE!”

When her two close friends heard her familiar voice, they grabbed ahold of the handle on their respective luggage and pulled it behind them, on those tiny little wheels, to this woman's car!

But before this woman was able to take off, the man in the car directly behind her stuck his head outside of the driver's window and called out to her: “EXCUSE ME MA'AM, BUT BEFORE YOU LEAVE—WOULD YOU PLEASE MIND HOLLERING FOR HAROLD?”

There are voices and there are voices, but apparently that woman had a powerful voice!

The same thing goes for that well-respected comedian named Carol Burnette! I don't know if any of you had the opportunity to watch the special program about her that was on CBS last Sunday evening marking the 50th Anniversary of the Carol Burnette Show!?!

When she was seated in the close company of a few friends, on life television, they asked her if she could, for old time's sake, still issue her famous “TARZAN” call. Well she did, and her voice was remarkably strong for a woman, 84 years old!

I always imagined it was a voice like that Isaiah had in mind when he wrote, "O ZION, HERALD OF GOOD TIDINGS, LIFT UP YOUR VOICE WITH STRENGTH."

It's a marvelous passage as read to us as the Old Testament lesson for this morning. It is one of the most familiar of the Christmas passages, made famous by Handel's oratorio, MESSIAH.

Isaiah wrote these words as the Word of God to the captives in Babylon. It was God speaking through Isaiah to declare his announcement to his people, living during the exile, that they were now free to go home; that is to travel back to Jerusalem and the land of Judah—from which their parents had been captured!

The 40th chapter of Isaiah is the announcement that that their present situation in life—during which they had been forced to live as exiles in a foreign land was now over! Through the Prophet Isaiah God is telling his people that they can now be 100% completely forgiven for their past. God was telling his people that it was now time for them to go home.

In other words, Isaiah was telling the Jewish people living in this foreign land: “You can turn from the past! You can go home now! God is offering you a new future!”

“Comfort my people,” God tells Isaiah. “Tell them that the war is now over! For they have received from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—a DOUBLE PARDON for all of their sins!

And here a “PARDON” does not mean that—God’s people’s past sins, for which they were indicted—was proven to be a great error in the judgments that were made against them. No, instead it means that though they were guilty of those past sins, God was not ready to completely remove all punishment from them and expunge their record of past sins as now being completely clean!

Then comes this beautiful vision of a highway that is being constructed in the desert, of all places, stretching all the way from Babylon to Jerusalem. On that highway God, himself would take the initiative of his desire to go to his people!

God was coming to his people to set them free, to redeem them from their bondage and to empower them to live a new life! *And there were even engineering instructions included in this passage. “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill be made low; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”*

So you and I can see, can’t we—how the Gospel writers quoted these passages to say that **IN ADDITION TO FREEING THE JEWISH PEOPLE FROM BABYLON, THESE WORDS OF THE HOLY BIBLE ARE ALSO PROPHECYING THE COMING OF THAT VERY FIRST CHRISTMAS!**

Isaiah prophesied a powerful voice that would proclaim: *“Prepare the way of the Lord!”* and the Christians said—that voice is the voice of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist—what a remarkable man he was!

R. Kent Hughes in his commentary entitled: MARK—JESUS SERVANT AND SAVIOR, tells us that this could very well mean that John the Baptist baptized over 300,000 people in years of his faithful ministry.

But think about it! People did not turn out in droves like that—for something that was **merely make-believe or a fantasy; or for some kind of: “Bye and bye, pie in the sky” kind of wishful thinking—but only because their lives were truly being changed** and made **genuinely new under the powerful ministry of God the Holy Spirit**. And the Bible tells us in **Luke 1:15** that John the Baptist was in possession of the Holy Spirit, even while he was still an unborn child safely tucked away in his mother Elizabeth’s body!

This past week, as I contemplated once again John the Baptist and the powerful things that the LORD God was doing for so many people through his ministry down there at the Jordan River, I found myself thinking about another man and his relationship to a river too; a man and his relationship to a river that is depicted for us in a 1927 MUSICAL PERFORMANCE entitled SHOWBOAT.

The most popular song to come out of that Musical Production was a song entitled: “Old Man River,” with the tune being written by a man named Jerome Kern and the lyrics were written by the great Oscar Hammerstein II.

It was a musical performance that greatly contrasted the struggles and the hardships of African Americans who were working as dockhands on those types of SHOWBOATS prior to the Civil War, with the endless, uncaring flow of the Mississippi River. Do you remember the lyrics to that very stirring song?

“Old man river, that old man river; he must know something, but don’t say nothing. He just keeps rolling; he just keeps rolling along!”

This song was suggesting that no matter how old, or how difficult, or how worn out human beings can become in their tireless efforts of work in which they have toiled for long and arduous hours, the Mississippi River....no matter how old it became...just kept moving as constantly and swiftly as it always had.

The African Americans working on these landing docks could see in that powerful Mississippi River something that certainly gave the appearance, to

them, of having eternal significance; especially when compared to the very own temporal nature.

You know many of those African Americans prior to the Civil War became Christians—and the strongest belief that they had embodied in themselves—was the certainty and the reality of heaven—expressed in many other songs like this too.

Their belief was very closely aligned with that of the Apostle Paul who one day wrote in ROMANS 8:17-19, ***“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us!”***

Apart from Jesus Christ, John the Baptist is probably the most theologically significant figure in the Gospels. As was the case with Jesus, the events surrounding his birth are meticulously recorded for us in the Gospels. His entrance into the world, like that of Jesus, was marked by an angelic proclamation and divine intervention. John’s birth not only parallels that of Jesus, but echoes the momentous occasion of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:15-22), in that John’s parents were childless for years and they had lost all hope of one day having a child of their own.

So many names are ascribed to John the Baptist in the Bible. He is **“the voice”** of one crying in the wilderness. He was the **“second Elijah”** who was to come. He was a **“prophet.”** But we have remembered him also, historically, as a **“forerunner”** of Jesus Christ; the very **Preparer** of Jesus’ eventual Advent into our world.

*In today’s parlance, John the Baptist is being depicted more and more often, it seems to me, to use some very contemporary language and jargon as a **“trail-blazer!”***

Think of all the many, many trailblazers in world history who blazed the way for others to continue a great work with they began. How about CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS? How many of our teachers taught us that little ditty: In 1492, Columbus said the ocean blue,” because they wanted us to remember the year he discovered the New World, and how he became a Spanish explorer for so many other explorers on the high seas who would come after him! Columbus was a trailblazer.

80 years later, in 1572, a Polish astronomer named Nicholas Copernicus initiated another revolution; when his observations of the heavens convinced him that the 2nd Century AD Roman astronomer named Claudius Ptolemy was completely wrong when he taught that the

earth was the center of our solar system, while Copernicus found the proof he needed that we are living in a heliocentric galaxy instead, that the earth and those other heavenly bodies—known as planets, revolve around the sun!

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, became trailblazers in the United States, when they set out on an expedition that led them on a three-year journey westward, shortly after the United States was able to make the Louisiana Purchase from France back in 1803; a dollar amount today that would be equivalent to \$250 million. In doing so—they also blazed a trail for countless other pioneers to go west in their search of land and fame and fortune!

In 1967, Dr. Christiaan Barnard, a South African heart surgeon, blazed a trail when he performed the first heart transplant in 1967.

Although Dr. Bernard's first transplant patient lived for only 18 days, his second transplant patient lived for a year and a half. Today the transplantation of human hearts has become so commonplace and numerous, that we no longer receive even one word about them in the local **newspaper or on the evening news!** Dr. Barnard was a trailblazer for heart surgery as we know it in the modern world today!

So how about you and me, my brothers and sisters, do we recognize the fact that just like John the Baptist, our God has also called upon us to be trailblazers for Christ.

Jesus said something very amazing one day: ***“Of all those men born until now, none have been greater than John the Baptist! But he who is least in the kingdom of God, is greater than he!”***

Jesus is talking about you and me, because while he prophesied the coming of Christ, he never fully knew the joy and peace that comes to a person when they know for a certainty that Christ is living within them. God has not only called upon us to become trailblazers for Christ, but the faith to believe also, as Paul said one day to the Galatians: ***“IT IS NO LONGER I WHO LIVE, BUT CHRIST WHO LIVES IN ME, AND THE LIFE I NOW LIVE IN THE FLESH I LIVE BY FAITH IN THE SON OF GOD, WHO LOVED ME AND GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR ME” (GALATIANS 2:20)! AMEN***