

Reflecting the Light

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Advent 3-B, December 17, 2017

You've heard the expression before I'm sure: "Larger than life!" And you know how we use that "description" to sometimes talk about someone—whose appearance and whose behavior—seems much more exaggerated to us—than you would usually see displayed in your average, every day, run-of-the mill human being!

Larger than life people are people who are very comfortable in their own skin. Larger than life people are people who have strong personalities—not in a bad way—but in a good way. Larger than life people stand out in the crowd and—who usually feel very comfortable being around other people.

Think of the Beatles, for example, that English Rock Band that was formed in Liverpool in 1960. With its members John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison and Ringo Star! They quickly became the most influential signing group of the whole rock era. Do you know that they still are the best-selling band in history, having sold over 800 million physical and digital albums worldwide!?! Do you know that they remain the best-selling musical artists in the United States today!?!

John Wayne was a larger than life person! Lucile Ball was a larger than life person. And I would say to you that John the Baptist was a larger than life person too!

Last Sunday St. Mark told us how John the Baptist arrived on the banks of the Jordan River one day, preaching the Word of God and baptizing sinners who repented of their sins--so that they could also receive the forgiveness for all their sins.

St Mark tells us that when John the Baptist arrived down there on the , he came in the fulfillment of two great messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament.

The first prophecy was written in Malachi 3:1, "See I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way!"

The second prophecy was written in Isaiah 40:3: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!'"

But when the Apostle John, introduces John the Baptist to us in our Gospel lesson today—he himself doesn't mention even one of those Old Testament prophecies to us—or tell us anything about the way that John the Baptist dressed – "with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist."

Nor does John share anything with us about John the Baptist's daily intake of "locusts and wild honey," the way that Matthew, Mark and Luke all do!

The Apostle John simply tells us: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was NOT the light, but came to bear witness about the light" (John 1:6-8).

John the Baptist WAS NOT THE LIGHT, but a larger-than-life person who came among us to bear a witness to the light!

WHY? So that all who heard John preach the Word of God and were baptized by him for the forgiveness of their sins, might genuinely come to believe that Jesus Christ was, in fact, the Son of God; the long awaited, promised Messiah of this world!

My friends, this past Monday I was driving down Lake Murray Boulevard, headed east, towards downtown Columbia about 4 o'clock in the afternoon—about that same time of day when the amount of traffic on Lake Murray Boulevard quickly doubles!

There I was, stopped at the traffic light on the corner of Lake Murray Boulevard and St Andrew's road! While there, I glanced in my rearview mirror and could see some red flashing lights, that were probably some two or three miles behind me, but coming towards me—also on Lake Murray Boulevard.

The traffic light, at that intersection, was red—and there were probably, at least, some 20 to 25 cars piled up behind me, behind that traffic light. Soon, I realized that that emergency vehicle was an ambulance.

But there I sat, wondering how that ambulance was going to find a clear path when it arrived there.

Fortunately, some 30 seconds later—that red traffic light did turn green—so that the heavy traffic loosened up—so that—that ambulance, with its flashing red lights and loudly blaring siren could continue on its way!

I'm not sure where that ambulance was headed! Perhaps it was headed to our new Parkridge Hospital on Highway 60 across from THE CRACKER BARREL! Or maybe it was destined for one of our older, bigger and more established hospitals—downtown.

But this is when it dawned on me that THOSE FLASHING LIGHTS THAT APPEARS ON ANY OF THOSE EMERGENCY-TYPE VEHICLES, LIKE AMBULANCES, FIRETRUCKS, OR POLICE CARS--- USUALLY MEAN THAT SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, IS IN GREAT TROUBLE AND VERY MUCH IN NEED OF SOME OUTSIDE HELP.

And isn't this what the ministry of John the Baptist was also all about? John came among us, when we were in the deep trouble of being separated from our God by our sins, to tell us that some OUTSIDE HELP WAS ON ITS WAY TO US!

Friends, I don't know about you—but I know some people have told me occasionally, that something that happens to me--may also happen to them at times. And that's when I hear a certain song and for some reason it just seems to stick in my mind all day.

This can happen to me with certain Bible verses too, and this is how it has been for me ever since our midweek Advent worship service last Wednesday, when we took a closer look at one of the best known Messianic prophecies to be found anywhere in the Old Testament--though this one is found in Isaiah 11:1--and reads like this: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots!" And this was the message that God gave his chosen prophet, Isaiah, to share with the people of Judah in the 8th Century BC.

Through his relentless preaching of God's Word to God's people—the Prophet Isaiah's message for the people of Judah was:

"HANG ON! HELP IS ON THE WAY! SOMEONE IS COMING TO SAVE YOU—SOMEONE WHO IS UNIQUELY QUALIFIED FOR THE JOB. HE WILL HAVE THE SPIRIT'S ANOINTING ON HIS HEAD. AND HE WILL HAVE THE BELT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS TIED AROUND HIS WAIST!"

Just as an ambulance may come out of nowhere, the Prophet Isaiah was telling the people of Judah that some outside would one day be on way to them from a most unexpected place!

In the first half of the BOOK OF ISAIAH, the prophet's message for God's people was for them to repent of all their sins—of idolatry and immorality that was causing their nation, unfortunately, to further head straight down a path of its own self-destruction!

But instead of the Jewish people putting their sole trust in the Lord, they sought to save themselves from a great military threat posed to them by the Babylonians—by forming a merely human alliance with the

Assyrians, who had already shown the whole world how cruel and untrustworthy they could be, when they invaded the northern kingdom of Israel some 125 years before this in 722 BC.

Isaiah told the people of Judah that God was going to level Judah like a lumberjack might mow down a forest, clear-cutting the nation and leaving only the stumps of those fallen trees behind him. With the tallest and mightiest trees of Judah, symbolizing that long line of kings that reigned from the throne of Judah---descended of King David, moreover of King David's father, a man named Jesse.

But it's just at the apex of Isaiah's forecasting this coming crisis that would eventually come upon the people of Judah, that he suddenly erupts with the good news of some outside help that would soon be coming upon them!

This would take place when a little green sprout of new life would then shoot up from the stump of one of those chopped-down trees--which Isaiah clearly identifies as the stump of Jesse, who was the father of David.

This little green branch, newly sprouting up from what appeared to be a dead tree stump--would one day become manifest among God's people as a BABY who would eventually be born into this world to a poor couple and laid in a manger.

And this we now know, in hindsight eventually happened in Bethlehem, in the City of David--because the Baby to be born would be a direct descendant of King David, on both his mother's and his father's sides of the family. This Baby to be born, of course, was Jesus Christ.

It was through this lovely majestic prophecy recorded for us in Isaiah 11:1 that the hymn writer would be inspired to write one of our most-loved Christmas carols:

"Behold a Branch is growing of loveliest form and grace,
As prophets sung, foreknowing, it springs from Jesse's race!
And bears one little Flower, In midst of coldest winter, at deepest midnight hour.

Have you ever wondered why we call our Savior—Jesus Christ? Christ is not Jesus' last name. Christ is his title. Christ or Cristo~ in Greek, means the same thing that the Hebrew word "Messiah" means in the Old Testament.

Back then, prophets and priests and kings were all anointed with some sacred oil, symbolizing the gift of the Holy Spirit that would come upon them at the time of their coronation or their installation into office! This process of being "anointed" would then set them apart as holy men, who now had a special mission to fulfill.

Jesus was anointed by God the Holy Spirit at the hour of his baptism, when the voice of the Heavenly Father spoke saying: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased!"

Yes, unlike any other ordinary men—Isaiah tell us that the Promised Messiah would be blessed with: "The Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. And his delight would be in the FEAR OF THE LORD" (Isaiah 11:1-3).

Another sure sign of the true Messiah's presence among us, Isaiah foretold, is that he would have "The Belt of Righteousness Tied Around his Waist" (Isaiah 11:5). And this would be especially good news for sinners like us!

To understand what that means we have to keep in mind how people dressed so differently in that Middle Eastern Culture back then, so different from the way we all dress today. Today, many of us, men and women prefer wearing a pair of pants or a pair of slacks.

But pants are a fairly new invention. In the Middle East of Isaiah's time, and in some places in the Middle East today, both men and women--wore loose, long-flowing robes.

In some ways those long flowing robes were more practical than pants! They were much easier to make and they were cooler, because they allowed for air to circulate more freely—which was something especially important for people living in an arid climate.

The only time, perhaps, when those long flowing robes were not a good garment to wear is when these ancient people wanted to do something that we might label today as being “practical”! You know, doing those things like running, or fighting, or working.

Then these ancient people had to tie up their robes so that they would not become prohibitive of the task their wearers were performing!

When the Messiah eventually comes, Isaiah reminds us, he would put on the belt of righteousness—that would be like our saying today—that he would rolling up his sleeves. The Messiah would put on his belt—roll up his sleeves, because he was really getting down to business. The Messiah would understand that he had a job to do and what an enormous job his assignment would be.

The Messiah would come to disempower the forces of evil over people’s lives. He would do this--Isaiah tells us also--by slaying the wicked. In Isaiah we read that when the Promised Messiah arrived that he would “strike the earth!” The coming Messiah would “slay the wicked,” but not with swords or guns, but Isaiah tells us the coming Savior would do all of this for human beings with “the rod of his mouth” (Isaiah 11:4)!

Christ’s chief weapon while he walked among people on this earth in his state of humiliation in this world, would be the Word of God that he would speak forth among people, even as he continues to speak forth the Word of God among us today!

Matthew tells us that when Jesus first steps into the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist, John initially protested our Savior’s request.

“It’s not you, who needs to be baptized by me, but it’s I who need to be baptized by you!” John said to Jesus, but this is when Jesus replies: “Let it be so for now, in order to fulfill all righteousness;” meaning that right there and then—Jesus, who was without sin—was identifying himself with all of us who are by nature sinful, so that he could take our place under the law of God for us—when the appointed time came—offer himself as the perfect sacrificial Lamb upon the altar of the cross!

The good news that John the Baptist was sharing was not unlike the good news that the Prophet Isaiah had shared with the people of Judah: “Even though you are in deep trouble, some outside help is on the way!”

And wasn’t this really the message of the angels to the shepherds that first Christmas night: “Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy that will be for you and for all people, for unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11)!

Martin Luther captured this very same truth in his great Christmas Hymn when he wrote into song the words of that most-welcomed angel:

“From heaven above to earth I come, to bear good news to every home!
Glad tidings of great joy I bring, whereof I know will say and sing:

“To you this night is born a Child, of Mary, chosen, Virgin mild;
This little Child of lowly birth shall be the joy of all the earth!”

To say that John the Baptist came to bear witness to the LIGHT means above all other things that John the Baptist came to bear witness to Jesus Christ. For us to reflect that light of his love and grace in this world means that we also, in word and deed, are to bear witness to Jesus Christ in this world. Amen