

Sermon December 4, 2011  
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Sisters and brothers: Was there a quiet time in American politics? If there was, it's over.

Candidates keep company with us like daily bread – albeit often stale bread. Issues are presented by signature gatherers at the front doors of grocery stores. The media covers every story and a bunch of non-stories like too much gravy on mashed potatoes. The only escape is to become a hermit living deep in the forest with blackberry bushes for company – not a blackberry phone.

While I grow tired of it all I understand the need for it. When someone wants to lead the Word has to get out.

You might think that you could come to worship and escape politics. Too bad. So sad. John the Baptist is with us in this morning's Gospel and he is politicking. John is on the staff of the Jesus' campaign to become the leader for the people. John is the advance man getting things ready.

St. Mark borrows language from Isaiah to describe John's work. "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

That language is from a time when the people Israel – so long exiled in Babylon – are coming back home. It is highway construction. The way will be paved so God can lead the people on straight paths and level roads. It is a moment filled with hope about the future.

John the Baptist is announcing another return from exile. God's people will be brought face to face with God. Knowing God's heart and mind. Entering God's realm as it is set in the midst of history. John is getting folks ready for Jesus who is about to begin his public ministry. Jesus will lead the people like a shepherd and finally be chosen – though his inauguration turns out to be different.

The mood surrounding John's work is hopeful. After long years of foreign domination the people are ready. After some sense of estrangement from God the people are ready. After fits and starts with other attempts at liberation the people are ready.

When John's work is finished and Jesus' work begins the people are not disappointed – at least not at first. Jesus says all the right things. Jesus does all the right things. The people could not have scripted things better if they were in charge of Jesus' agenda. Of course they are not – anymore than we are.

With each Word and each miracle Jesus will identify the realities that God always intended for the Creation and all the creatures. The vision is one where the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, the demons are brought under control, compromised leaders are replaced, the poor are raised up, and everyone can live in peace and safety.

But, every Word and every miracle pointing to God's intentions for the world have huge implications for change on the part of all the people. If all the people are to be fed, folks will have to share food with others. If the sick are to be healed priorities need to shift from care for some to care for all. If demons are

to be controlled people will have to stop their infatuation with hurtful and hateful things and embrace helpful and loving ways. If compromised leaders are to be replaced people will have to shift allegiances from patriotism to discipleship. If the poor are going to be raised up the wealthy will see their accumulations diminish. And if all are to live in peace and safety the human addiction to violence and the instruments of violence will have to be brought under control and cured.

Jesus quickly moves from preaching to meddling, and we all prefer our preachers to talk in sweet and gentle ways that touch on a spirituality that does not disturb our lives. Meddling of the sort that Jesus does is seldom welcomed and never safe. Alas. Jesus is the embodiment of God – possessed of God’s heart and mind. Jesus has no choice – God is always meddling to bring God’s realm near the earth.

“Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ...”

That is a gorgeous notion that Lutherans applaud when we listen to Handel’s “Messiah”, but it starts to pinch and then to hurt when it occurs to thoughtful people that God is talking about making the playing field level for everyone. God’s agenda moves from charity to justice, and justice will cost every one of us more than we want to pay.

Jesus comes among us as an enormous shift in the landscape and bit by bit we become aware of what is going on in the coming of the Ruler. And bit by

bit we grow less and less enamored of “sweet, little, baby Jesus” and nervous because Jesus is among us to be the “Lord of Lords and King of Kings.” That is unapologetically political talk, and though you might get rid of a preacher turned meddler (remember that Herod cut John the Baptist’s head off and Pilate had Jesus crucified), another preacher turned meddler will come along with the same Word because it is God’s Word which lasts forever.

Is there any hope that we might welcome Jesus the politician rather than killing him or his messengers in this generation? I think so. My hope is rooted in John’s promise to the crowds who gathered from all over Israel.

John says, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” God’s own Spirit is poured out on all the people and God’s Spirit becomes the driving force in life.

God’s Spirit is poured out on Peter and Andrew and Mary and Martha. God’s Spirit is poured out on Paul and Lydia and Stephen and Lois and Eunice. God’s Spirit led them into adventures they never imagined, but wouldn’t have missed for this world or the next.

They were not perfect people. But, they were people who took God for all God was worth and shaped their lives in and through God’s guidance. God continues to pour out God’s Spirit on the people. God’s Spirit poured out on you and me, and who knows what outrageous things could happen?

Allow God’s Spirit to shape the sharing of your life and possessions so they are more earthly good and heaven blessed.

For every dollar you spend buying Christmas presents for those you know and love, match the dollar with a gift to further God's work in the world on behalf of the poor and vulnerable that God knows and loves. Borrow it. Take it from your stock portfolio. Do NOT steal it. Give a huge gift to the Baby's favorite brothers and sisters. It will make the best Christmas ever for you and the Baby will be glad.

You are thinking, "this preacher is meddling and crazy." That's true on both counts. I get crazy when the Christ Child smiles at me. Be careful when he smiles at you. I start meddling when God's Spirit leads me into places I had no intention of going. They don't send sermons out from Church headquarters in Chicago. When I begin with the Gospel I have no idea where things will head. That is the mystery of God's Spirit poured out on meddlers and all the rest of God's people. Share outrageously, and if it costs a lot remember the return is eternal.

Use your voice to speak to others – especially to those in power. Every time a politician promises prosperity without sacrifice tell the person that is not God's way. God's way is for all to sacrifice so all can participate in the good things of the earth.

Stick your neck out. When someone says "we can't do that" remind them that the real truth is "we won't do that." And God's Spirit is turning hearts and minds from "won't do" to "can do."

Smart folks will tell you it is foolish to care for people you don't know and will never meet. Remind them that "the foolishness of God is wiser than the

wisdom of people,” and you are taking God at God’s Word because God’s Spirit has been poured out on you and you are stuck with God for the duration.

Preaching become meddling. That is what John is preparing us for and what Jesus delivers. Meddling in every life. Sometimes an irritant. Sometimes hard duty. Sometimes enormous changes. But, always possible because God’s Spirit is poured out on us.

The problem with meddling is the people are going to be disappointed. Jesus is saying and doing what is needed more than what is wanted. That is always a dangerous strategy. Meddlers know that.

“But, it is Jesus’ way “so the rough places will become a plain and the Glory of God will be revealed so all people can see it together.”

All people.

It is politics pure and simple. John getting people ready. Jesus leading the people. Politics. God’s politics.