

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“That’s the Sign-Post Up Ahead...”**

**Malachi 3:1 – 4
Luke 3:1 – 6**

Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2015

One of my favorite TV shows growing up was *The Twilight Zone*. I know that, by today’s *Star Wars*, computer-generated, special effects that are more real than real life itself, standard... *The Twilight Zone* probably seems kind of hokey. But back in the day, that show was cutting edge, man! And boy did it ever scare the heck out of me! Remember the one where William Shatner was a passenger on an airplane... and the monster was out on the wing, trying to pull the flaps off the plane? I’m pretty sure that was Jerry Adams dressed in the monster suit! I had nightmares about that one for a week!

Of course, most of us are familiar with the catchy *Twilight Zone* theme music; you know that, “dee-dee-dee-dee, dee-dee-dee-dee, dee-dee-dee-dee!” But did you realize that, over the years, there were at least four or five different intros to the *Twilight Zone*? And a couple of them used different music, and not the catchy theme song! But, my favorite *Twilight Zone* intro was one that *did* use the familiar “dee-dee-dee-dee” jingle. And, over that eerie music, the voice of Rod Serling could be heard, saying:

“You’re traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind; a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. That’s the signpost up ahead! Your next stop, the *Twilight Zone*!” Dummm-duh-duh-du-du-da-duh! And you see the words THE TWILIGHT ZONE looming before you... and then, poof! they break up and disappear! Then the episode begins.

(Pause...)

Now, I’m not suggesting that our lesson today from Luke’s gospel is like something from the *Twilight Zone*; and I’m not trying to say that John the Baptist was some kind of first-century Rod Serling. But what *I* am saying is that, *like* that signpost which points out to us that we’ve entered the *Twilight Zone*, John the Baptist is now pointing out the way to us by which we may enter the kingdom of God; by which we may come into the domain of our Heavenly Father; and through which we may live lives of faithful, meaningful, discipleship.

When John came walking out of that Judean desert, calling on “people to prepare the way of the Lord,” he was saying that not just any path will carry a person into God’s presence; that not just any road will lead us to the peace which only God can give; that not just any way is a good way to find a life of meaning, and purpose and hope. No, John was saying *this* is the way that leads to God’s kingdom; *here* is the way to find life-changing grace and forgiveness; the way that *I’m*

pointing is where you'll find the nourishment for your hearts and souls. *"There's the signpost up ahead,"* John is saying; *"Follow it, and your life will never be the same again!"*

Now, we know that one of the key ways in which we follow that "signpost to the Kingdom of God" is by practicing the discipline of repentance... as Luke tells us that John went about "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And, in the verses following our text this morning, John will go on to make it crystal clear that, in order to find our way into the grace, and peace, and new life of God's presence... we must change, we must "turn around" from our old life of sin and self-preoccupation, to a new life of virtue and concern for the things of God. And next week we're going to look more closely at what that means, and how we might accomplish it, and what difference it all makes to our day to day life of faith.

But, for this morning, the main point I want to make is simply that, as John the Baptist so beautifully reminds us, it really does matter which trailblazers we follow... as we engage in our quest to be faithful Christian disciples. It makes a difference, and sometimes a profound difference, if we're on the right road... or the wrong road; if we're paying attention to wise voices... or to foolish voices; if we're really *trying* to be connected with the things of God, and the ways of God... or if we're just doing our thing, and paying little heed to the things to which God might want us to pay attention.

So, it's really important for those of us who are trying to live as Christian disciples, that we follow the right signs, listen to the right voices, heed the right directions, and do the right things... which are going to keep us moving along that godly path about which John was speaking in our lesson.

And that can be a whole lot easier said than done, right? Because, if there's one thing we know for sure, it's that, in our massively distracted, overly superficial, completely invested in the busyness of life, twenty-first century world... we have many, many different signposts to follow in our quest to find lives of hope, and peace, and meaning; some of them good, many of them not so good. There's lots of people, projects, priorities, and passions that call to us with the promise of finding whatever it is we think we're looking for in life... which promise to make us happy, and whole, and fulfilled; and some of those people, projects, priorities, and passions can do that... but many of them can't.

There's an entire cosmic Golden Corral Buffet of options and opportunities calling to us; each of them saying, "follow me, and I'll give you a life that's worth living." But many times that's an empty promise; and our hearts keep telling us that we need something more. Now, that was true in the days of John the Baptist, of course, but I think it's even truer for us, today... with our nearly unlimited capacity to become electronically connected to an inexhaustible supply of opportunities to get off track and wind up following leads that will get us nowhere in our life with the Lord. So, it's essential that we choose wisely, when we make our decisions about who we're going to follow... in our quest to live effectively, and successfully, as God's people.

(Pause...)

As we think about this effort to follow the right signs, and listen to the right voices, in our life as Christian disciples... I think that Luke provides us with a pretty good starting point, by referencing the words of the prophet Isaiah in describing the ministry of John the Baptist. As John begins his work, Luke informs us that he, John, is acting in fulfillment of the “words of the prophet Isaiah.” And then Luke goes on to quote those words:

“A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.”

Now, of course, Luke used these prophetic words to describe what John the Baptist was out there doing; and the clear meaning is that John was “preparing the way of the Lord,” and calling on others to be engaged in that preparation themselves. The kingdom of Almighty God was on the way... and people had to make everything ready to receive it. But the thing to keep in mind is that *that* proclamation, of the imminent arrival of royalty, was what was customarily used to announce the coming of an *earthly* king, or emperor, or monarch.

If a king was returning home from a great, victorious, battle... and drawing near to a town or village on the way; heralds would go out ahead of the royal entourage to announce that the king is on his way! And since the king is coming, you’d better put together a pretty good red-carpet welcome to receive him! So, fill in the ruts and potholes in the road! Level out the uneven places where the king will be walking! Do away with circuitous routes and make the road laser straight! Give the king smooth sailing into your village... and pay him the homage which is his due! And he will spare your lives; and defend your property; and let you live in peace as his servants and his vassal.

That’s what was said when an earthly, human king was on the way. And now we hear those same words again... in reference to John the Baptist. According to Luke, John was out there as a signpost announcing the impending arrival of a king... and a kingdom. But, which king? And which kingdom? Well, he wasn’t talking about one of the several King Herod’s who were ruling their small pieces of the Holy Land pie at that time. And he wasn’t talking about the aged Tiberius Caesar, who was wasting away in Rome or on Capri, and who couldn’t have cared less about anything that was going on in Palestine. And he wasn’t even talking about a representative of Caesar, someone like Pontius Pilate... who at that time didn’t even know that John the Baptist existed, and was certainly not interested in anything he might have been saying or doing.

John wasn’t talking about any of those guys... the likely set of suspects for an announcement of royal arrival. No, what John was talking about, was the arrival of *Jesus...* and the inauguration of the Kingdom of *God. God’s* kingdom, and *God’s* representative were about to take center stage on planet earth. Not just the latest version of earthly pomp, and power, and prestige and personal narcissism. But a completely new reality... with a totally different set of operating principles.

The announcement of the earthly king always carried with it the threat of death and destruction if you didn’t toe the line; but the announcement of the heavenly king carried with it the promise of peace, and grace, and eternal life... if people would just open their hearts and let

the king take residence there. And John the Baptist, like that signpost that's up ahead, is pointing and saying, *"That's the way you want to go! Follow the Messiah of God who's on His way! Herod can't give you life; Caesar can't give you hope; all of the kingdoms of this world can't give your life **meaning**; but Jesus can, and Jesus will! So make yourselves ready to receive Him, when He gets here."*

(Pause...)

Now, as I said, next week we're going to look more specifically at just how we're supposed to do that. But, as I also said, John has already given us a great big clue for getting started on the right track. And that's simply to make sure that we're doing our best to follow in the direction that **he's** pointing... and not in the direction of the countless counterfeits out there, which promise us peace and significance which they just can't deliver.

Our world shouts at us, constantly, that the true purpose of our life is to be wealthy, or famous, or powerful, or able to lord our status over others. Some of the most well-known, sought-out, and fawned-over people in our society are so vacuous, superficial, narcissistic, and unable to point to any meaningful accomplishment in their lives, that it simply defies belief. We're tempted every day to put our trust, and place our hope, in things that can never, truly, save us or satisfy us; while being equally tempted to treat the one thing that can give us hope, our relationship with Almighty God, as if it's just one more task on our shopping list of daily duties.

Now, there's nothing wrong with being famous; it's no sin to have a position of importance in life; we don't have to feel bad about enjoying our times of relaxation and entertainment. ***We just need to make sure that we never, ever, forget the direction in which our true hope lies.*** We need to make sure that we never, ever, forget that it is in Jesus Christ, and the kingdom which He has ushered into this world... that we find the hope, the peace, and the joy which can, and will, sustain us; in times of terrorism and violence, in times of political upheaval and unrest, in times when our problems seem far beyond our ability to solve.

John the Baptist is pointing in that direction; he's telling us, "that's the signpost up ahead;" may we with hope, and with confidence, and with courage, do all that we can to follow! That's our calling as Christian disciples; that's our life as children of God.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.