

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some people don't feel much like celebrating Christmas. Julie Russell in a blog article from last Christmas 2017 talks about how she dreaded the Christmas celebration. She had lost her mother during the year. She didn't blame others for celebrating, but office parties and family gatherings were forcing her to be a part of the celebration.

People of Judea probably didn't feel much like celebrating at times although they had their mandated festivals. They were living in oppression and poverty. The leadership of the church was corrupt and did not offer hope.

Even Christians sometimes don't feel like celebrating Christmas. Perhaps you have had enough sugar-coated cookies during the year. Perhaps you are exhausted from the bad news of the day. Maybe like a Julie Russell, you have suffered loss. You might say, "*I don't feel like celebrating.*"

The Advent Voice of John the Baptist has a real message that will get us excited about celebrating Christmas. **The Advent Voice Calls Us to a Real Christmas Celebration.**

1. Real Christmas because we have a real hope.

What do you think of when you think of John the Baptist? I think of rugged man with rugged clothes living in the barren wilderness. I also think his message of repentance is just as rugged. If this is all we think of John, then we are missing the best part. His message was all about hope. That message of hope will help us to celebrate Christmas.

A. Luke's gospel is unique in that it highlights real history behind the coming of the Savior. This history shows us a real need for a Savior.

1. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...

The history given by Dr. Luke in verses 1 & 2 seems innocent enough, but for first century ears it was loaded with bad news. Here is a quick list of what we are missing:

Caesars, Julius and Augustus - They had turned Rome into their empire by murdering their political opponents. We get upset with mudslinging! Julius also forced Tiberius Caesar to divorce the woman he loved dearly and marry Julius' sister. The Caesars also demanded that people worship them as gods.

Pontius Pilate - He was a rising star in Rome's diplomatic corp. While governor he was responsible for crucifying thousands. The people lived in fear.

Herod's boys were guilty of adultery, theft and murder.

Annas and Caiaphas are reported to have run the temple like a mafia syndicate to enrich themselves.

You get the picture. Around the people there was all kinds of corruption and oppression. No wonder the people loved the idea of an earthly Messiah to rescue them from their troubles. However, when John came he promised them much more.

B. The Lord God in heaven is aware of what is going on here on earth. He sees that evil was not just a first century problem. It is a 21st century problem. He sends his messengers just like he sent John the Baptist. What did John do? John was a voice issuing a call to prepare the people for the coming of salvation. God was going to send a Savior. Let's see what Luke has to report.

1. **“The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”**

John received a direct call from God, like the prophets of the Old Testament. He was to take a message to the people. God was speaking through him. His words would hurt consciences because he would convict people of their sins.

But his words would heal, because there was forgiveness through the coming Savior. This would help more than any earthly message ever could. Jesus promises, **“The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.”** (John 6:63) This includes John's words which came from God.

2. We don't have all of John's preaching written down, but we have enough to know what he spoke about. Luke tells us, **“He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** John reached out to all the people that he could because all people have the same problem. Sin.

It wasn't just the Caesars, Herods, and priestly class that were up to their eye balls in misdeeds. The merchants and tax collectors were robbing others. The poor looked with greed at the upper classes and everyone was bad

mouthed the Romans. Do you think our generation is the only one with lust issues and sinful divorces? Jesus dedicates a section of his Sermon on the Mount to these same sins. The truth is that every generation of humanity is sitting in the darkness of sin until God shines the light of salvation into our lives and hearts.

The reason people came to see John, the Baptist, was because he gave them real hope from God. John offered them in the forgiveness of sins in the name of the One whose sandals he was not worthy of untying. Forgiveness of sins meant living in the light, living as children of God. God has promised to take care of his children for time and eternity. This was real hope in a dark world.

C. What makes Christmas real and enjoyable for you and me is real hope from God.

--Real hope is losing a family member or being separated from your family but knowing that you are a part of God's family and God is with you.

--Real hope is when peace is shattered by terrorism and violence, but peace that comes from the forgiveness of sins is unbreakable.

--Real hope is knowing that despite cancer or pneumonia ending your Christmas traditions here, that you will celebrate forever in heaven.

--Real hope gives us joyful energy to get through parties, gatherings, card writing and any other activities that the season compels us to do.

2. Real Christmas because we have a real salvation.

People flocked out to see John, the Baptist because he had a real message of hope. John did not only proclaim hope, he proclaimed a real salvation by pointing to the Savior. Jesus makes Christmas real and wonderful for us.

A. John's work was to prepare people for the coming of the Savior.

1. Isaiah, the prophet, prophesied that John would call out for people to **"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."** Perhaps you have heard someone say, *"Straighten out."* The idea is that a person is guilty of continuing bad behavior and they are "crooked." They need to straighten out their life. The Judean people didn't just have a few sins of lust or hate. They had crooked hearts. John proclaims that they need to have their hearts straightened out. This is a work only the Savior could do.

2. John describes the people's hearts as having valleys to fill in and mountains and hills to lower.

When these people or you and I get into the "valleys" of life, we can be

rather sinful. When things are not going well and we are “down in the dumps”, do we pray fervently and trust completely in the Lord? Very often believers will be prodded by their sinful nature to complain and grumble. If we let our sinful nature stay in control, we can spiral downward until we decide that God is mean or he doesn't exist and we no longer believe in him.

The hills and mountains for believers are when we experience God's blessings and we believe that we had everything to do with our successes and achievements. We give God little or no credit. If this continues we become so proud that we feel God owes us eternal life because we are so good.

3. Both the “valleys” and the “hills” and “mountains” are a product of our sinfulness. Preachers like John, the Baptist point out how crooked our hearts are. They call us to repent that is to have a change of heart. We are to be sorry for our sins. We confess with the tax collector that Jesus described in one of his parables, “*God have mercy on me a sinner.*” The Holy Spirit through the message leads us to stop sinning and to look to God for salvation.

B. John also pointed people to the Savior. Isaiah put it this way, “**And all people will see God's salvation.**”

1. The shepherds saw him in Bethlehem. This was a child born of a virgin. He was the Son of God. The people of Judea and Galilee got to see him and watch him perform miracles. Pontius Pilate got to see him and declared, “**This Man has done nothing wrong.**” The Roman centurion at Calvary saw him die and declared, “**This was a righteous man.**” (Luke 23:47) The disciples saw Jesus after Easter and he told them, “**Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.**” (Luke 24:47) Jesus makes crooked hearts straight through his righteous life and death.

2. Someday all people will see Jesus when he comes back on the clouds on the last day. Then everyone will acknowledge him as the Savior of the world. Only those who believe have the forgiveness and life which Jesus won at the cross. As the Apostle John says in his gospel, “**These things are written that you may believe.**” We hear God's voice in Scripture.

Conclusion: Don't feel like celebrating? If you have one of those days or months, understand that you are not alone. It may be that you don't celebrate all of the cultural and earthly customs of Christmas. Especially as Christians let's help each other to remember and celebrate the most important part, the part that helps us.

We can remind each other of the Advent Voice. John cries out loud and clear. **“Repent and believe!”** He points to Jesus. We have reason to celebrate. We have hope. We have real forgiveness of sins from a real Savior. God is with us. God will help us. God will take us to heaven someday.

We don't have to jump up and down and do cartwheels. However, we have joy in our hearts. We celebrate Jesus as our wonderful Savior. Amen.

Context: Luke has reported on the Advent of Christ, chapter 1. Then he reported on the birth of Christ and the fulfillment of the ceremonial law, chapter 2. He has even added the story of Jesus' visit to the Temple during his boyhood. Now Luke turns to the years of Jesus' ministry, but first sets the scene by presenting John, the Baptist. Scriptures have prophesied that a herald will appear before the Messiah in the spirit of the prophet Elijah. This is John. The appearance of John during the Advent of Christ serves to prepare us during the season of Advent to prepare for the celebration of Christ's first coming and to ready ourselves for the Second Coming.

Malady: Real Advent preparation is more than outward compliance with God's law. "Have you been naughty or nice? Santa is coming to town."

Propositional Statement: Advent voice calls us to real repentance and shows us a real Savior.

FIRST LESSON - Malachi 3:1-4

(NIV 2011)

1 "I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

(NIV 1984)

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SECOND LESSON - Philippians 1:3-11

(NIV 1984)

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able

to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God.

SUPPLEMENTAL SECOND LESSON - 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

(NIV 2011)

1 This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. 3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

THE VERSE OF THE DAY

M: Alleluia. Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. All mankind will see God's salvation. Alleluia. (Luke 3:4,6)

THE GOSPEL - Luke 3:1-6

(NIV 2011)

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

5 Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

6 And all people will see God’s salvation.”[Isaiah 40:3-5]

(NIV 1984)

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for 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."