



“Christmas Checklist”

Rev. Jody Andrade

December 17, 2017

Isaiah 61: 1-4

How is your Christmas checklist looking? You know, it’s only 8 days away! Got the tree up? Stockings hung? And here’s the big one: did you get the family Christmas card done?

Going back over the scripture we just read, let’s add a few small, minor things to your list:

- ✓ Comfort all who mourn
- ✓ Bind up the brokenhearted
- ✓ Build up ancient ruins, raise up former devastations
- ✓ Repair ruined cities
- ✓ Display the Lord’s glory
- ✓ Bring good news to the oppressed

After all, Christmas is literally when THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON US. But WOW! I look at that check list and it makes the task of getting the family Christmas card out look pretty tiny.

In a few minutes Jennie will read to us what John the Baptist says when he emerges from the wilderness to proclaim his purpose in life. He quotes Isaiah. But the Bible leaves out WHY John the Baptist went into the wilderness. Is it possible that he was a lot like us? That the giant burden of comforting ALL and repairing RUINED cities seemed impossible? Those tasks are enough to make me want to run away!

Maybe John went into the wilderness looking for the strength to face what he knew he was called to do.

When I picture the wilderness, I imagined the desert until Rev. Andy Acton recently enlightened me. Listen to the words of Josephus, who lived in Israel from the years 37-97. Here is what he saw with his own eyes:

“[The land of Israel] is wonderful as well as its beauty; its soil is so fruitful that all sorts of trees can grow upon it . . . particularly walnuts. . . there are palm trees. . . fig trees also and olives grow near them.”¹

So John fled into the wilderness not to rocks and the sand of a barren desert, but to TREES!

Several years ago, my husband Billy and I visited Muir Woods, a forest of ancient trees outside of San Francisco.



The size and strength of those trees takes your breath away. As you probably know, as trees grow older, they get thicker so when you take a cross section of a tree, you see its history.



This Muir Woods tree, which fell in 1930, began life in the first century. It began its life in the same century of Christ’s birth! Before the cliff dwellers, the Aztecs, before Columbus sailed to America, before the Declaration of Independence, the California Gold Rush, WW1 through the Gulf Wars—you get the idea. When you are surrounded by these trees, you can sense their history, their power, their indomitable spirit. When you’re wrapped up in this part of creation, you sense the limitless power of God.

¹ Josephus *The Jewish War*. Book 3, Chapter 10:8.



Is that what John the Baptist found in that wilderness? He sure came out of the wilderness filled with the Holy Spirit. And that's a power we can all tap into. I can take that power found in the enormity of the North GA forest and tuck a prayer shawl, knit by one of our members here, under my arm, and cross the street to Duluth Medical and *comfort all who mourn*. I can take the power found in the complete silence of an early December snowfall and *bind up the broken hearted*, by sitting quietly with someone as they mourn a profound loss.

Your fellow member Brian Powers is a war veteran who returned home and wrote his PhD dissertation on the moral injury soldiers encounter during war. Counselor Laura Ware, who has an office at the end of the Sunday school hall, specializes in providing coping skills and healing to victims of tragedy who struggle with Post Traumatic Stress. Your Church Administrative Assistant Marianne Anderson gave me a sustaining hug when I was overwhelmed with life last week. *Comfort all who mourn? Bind up the broken hearted?* We can do this.

Darcy Messner, my neighbor's sister who is a structural engineer in California, devised a way to make earthquake resistant houses out of straw. Now families in Pakistan can move from living under a tarp



to sheltering inside four walls and a roof. Darcy doesn't know these people! But the Holy Spirit knows Darcy and suddenly the command in Isaiah to *build up ancient ruins* and *raise up former devastations* is checked off our list.



And these soldiers are handling *repair ruined cities*, using their power for good.



Anyone who heard Anya Lucia singing Mary's song, backed by a choir and orchestra last week can affirm that *display the Lord's glory* has been checked off our list.

Did you bring a gift for the Angel Mission Tree this morning? Have you put money in the Salvation Army bell ringer's bucket? Did you vote your conscience? Or tell a child about how we treat one another? Or share with someone, with anyone, the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord? Surely that's *bringing good news to the oppressed*?

And here is more good news. We don't do it alone. We are called not to BE the light but to POINT TO the light.

Wow! Follow John the Baptist into the woods and emerge with the power to point to the light of salvation in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Now if someone would just take on the impossible task of getting out my family Christmas card!

Amen.

“Living the Light”

Rev. Jennie Sankey

December 17, 2017

John 1:1-9, 19-28

The Gospel of John doesn't contain the birth story of Jesus as we like to think of it-baby Jesus at the manger, surrounded by animals, with angels and shepherds, and wise people traveling to meet them.



Nevertheless, I still think we get a birth story in John, it just takes a different approach. Drawing on the reader's knowledge of Old Testament, the author of John goes all the way back to the beginning, when creation itself was born. We are familiar with the pattern from Genesis 1 that reads "God said 'Let there be light, and there was light...and God saw that the light was good...'"



In this telling of the creation story, God speaks the word light and the word becomes actual light. Light itself is born. We know that when God speaks, God's words come alive. Continuing through the Old Testament, prophets, like Isaiah, are given "The Word of the Lord" to speak in messages and prophecies, God's words that reveal intention to affect real change among God's

people. In John's birth story though, something new happens with God's words. In an advent devotional I've been reading, Rev. Melissa Tidwell puts it, "Here, Word becomes flesh and enters into the world to transform it. John proclaims that Jesus is more than a prophet; he is an embodiment of the God who made the world and called for prophets. The message becomes the messenger."

The message becomes the messenger. The light became Jesus, a real person who becomes the embodiment of the message, "What has come into being ⁴in him was life,⁴ and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Then comes John the Baptist, sent by God to be a witness to testify to the light. John was not *the* light, but a witness to the light. Witnesses see events happen, and may be called on to describe what they've seen. In the setting of a court, witnesses are called upon to reach into their memory bank-what they saw, smelled, touched, tasted, or heard at the time of the event, to recount your experience of what happened. You tell the story as you know it. The best way John can describe what he has experienced and what he intends to do is through scripture. He quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Then John does everything in his power to live out these words. He proclaims God's message, he baptizes sinners, he changes lives. After baptizing Jesus, he says "And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."⁶

As we count the days left in Advent, drawing nearer to celebrating the birth of the incarnate Word, Rev. Tidwell suggest we "think about what the living Word says *to* us, spoken forth over creation, spoken forth through scripture, clothed in flesh in the person of Jesus and what it says *through* us, spoken forth in our living witness." Like John, we can testify to the Light, to the birth of Christ, who came to embody God's love and light in a dark world. We can do this just like he did-maybe not the honey, locusts, and living in the desert part-but in embodying scripture in both what we say and how we live. There are some looming figures in our history that are prime examples of embodying what they believe-think Abraham Lincoln, or Mother Teresa. But then there's also Florence and Jeff Milway,



who have testified to the light by teaching a group of children in this church from their kindergarten year to their current junior year, living lives that testify to God's nurturing and loving spirit. And Mary Don King (among many other wonderful volunteers)



who reads to these sweet kids from our church with me once a month, testifying to God's welcome and care for all.

And these middle school youth, singing at the top of their lungs, testifying to God's joyful Spirit!

(video of youth singing)



Take a moment right now and think of a scripture that really speaks to you, that has shown up in your life with meaning more than once, a scripture that resonates with you. If you can't think of one, look up at the screen for a few of my favorites you might like. It could be a verse or a whole story-but on your post-it note, summarize it in one sentence. (pause)



This week, the last week of Advent before Christmas, stick this note somewhere you'll see it a lot-maybe in your wallet, on your planner, on the bathroom mirror, by the kitchen sink, on your laptop, by the TV...and let it take root in you. Memorize the sentence. Say it when you're happy. Say it when you're mad. Say it when you're exhausted. Live it. Here's the one I'm going to try this week:

I'm preparing to preach on the story of the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary, announcing her imminent pregnancy with the son of God. After some conversation and questions, Mary says "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." My sentence is "This might be hard, but God, here I am." How will God use this growing word in me? I don't know yet. But I hope someone else will notice the "here I am " spirit within me this week.

The Spirit of God has anointed us. The Word of God has sent us. John testified to the light from his own experience of God's word, telling the story as he knew it. This Advent, get ready to tell that story how you know it. Become the messenger of your message. Get ready to not just be the voice, but be the life testifying to the light.