

## Heralds of the King

### Matthew 11:2-11

<sup>2</sup> Now when John heard from prison about the works of the Christ, he sent to him through his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said, “Are you the Coming One or should we wait for someone else?” <sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered them and said, “Go, tell John the things that you hear and see. <sup>5</sup> The blind are seeing again and the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed and the deaf are hearing, and the dead are being raised, and the poor are having the Gospel preached to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is the one who does not stumble on account of me.” <sup>7</sup> But as these men were going away, Jesus began to say to the crowds concerning John, “What did you go out into the desert to behold? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> Instead, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in finery? Behold those wearing fine things are in kings’ palaces. <sup>9</sup> Instead, what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one of whom it is written, ‘Behold I am sending my messenger before your face, one who will prepare your way before you.’ <sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, there has not arisen among those born of women one greater than John the Baptist. But the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.”

In the Name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### 1. Introduction.

What a pleasure it is for me to be with you here at Holy Spirit Anglican Church, the first time since your inaugural Sunday almost one full year ago. I am filled with joy even as an outsider not only to see your numbers grow, but to know that the same Gospel declared at our church in San Marcos, declared at churches throughout the diocese, throughout North America, and indeed throughout the whole world: that very Gospel is alive and well here at your church, bearing fruit for the glory of God.

And a large part of that fruit is a passion for missions, both near and far, as the church in San Diego steps into that mission that God himself has in this world: to reconcile, adopt, perfect, and glorify sinners through his Son our Savior Jesus Christ. This is not an ideal that simply fits on vision statements, to be paid lip service by an overworked and underpaid huddle of clergy. Rather, the measure of a community’s belief in and passion for the Gospel can be measured in their dedication to missions, both locally and globally.

And so, as Advent progresses and we continue to focus our heart on the waiting, on the expectation of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, we turn our attention to the mission given to him and now bequeathed to the church as it awaits and prepares for his return. And this requires turning our attention this Sunday to those who serve on the front lines of preparing the way for the Lord’s return by the preaching of the Gospel: missionaries.

Now, as I say this, it is important (I think) to get all my cards on the table before you: I am after all a missionary candidate to Buenos Aires, Argentina. My own ministry there will be centered simply on proclaiming the Gospel, making disciples of Jesus,

and building up his church through Word, Sacrament, and Prayer. And I am ardently seeking people to partner with me in this mission and ministry abroad by committing to pray and maybe even to give on a regular monthly basis to its needs. So, in one sense, this sermon could be about me, about my calling, and about my hopes and dreams for the future of my ministry. And, insofar as I am serving as a herald of my Lord Jesus Christ, it is: for precisely this reason your rector has invited me to come this morning and shameless ask for your financial support.

But my desire is to go much deeper, especially as we turn to our Gospel lesson this morning. Here Matthew recounts for us the question that John the Baptist puts to Jesus, Jesus' answer, and then Jesus' subsequent explanation of John's role in Jesus' ministry, part of which we read. And as Matthew skillfully relates this story, his point is this: ***God calls messenger to be heralds of the King, Jesus Christ.*** Whether it be John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, the Apostle Peter crying out in the temple, Fr. David Montzingo crying out among you, or my own voice crying out in South America, God has called us to be stewards of his mysteries so that we as God's people not only wait for but also hasten the return of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:12).

So, what does this ministry, this mission, this heralding look like? We get a nuanced vision of the qualities of God's messengers in the passage here, three essential characteristics of those who serve God as his messengers like John the Baptist and like so many others who have gone before us. Let us dive in here then to the story at hand.

## **2. Going before the Lord Jesus.**

The first thing that we must note regarding God's heralds is that they go before the Lord Jesus. Jesus has no need for messengers or for heralds when he is here to stay: they only become necessary when is yet still to come.

Jesus elaborates on this is the second part of the passage that we just read. John has had his doubts, has sent his disciples to inquire of the Messiah, and will soon have his answer when they arrive again. In the meantime, Jesus defends the reputation and honor of John, the Lord's messenger, by reminding the crowds that he was no shakable twig in the desert, nor a rich fop accustomed to the fineries of this world. Rather, John was a prophet, like Moses, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and so many others before him. He proclaimed God's word on his behalf to a rebellious and hard-hearted people.

But he is more than any of the others, says Jesus. He is the one prophesied by God in the book of Malachi to come just before the coming of God himself, to prepare his ways before him. He was Elijah, sent to turn the hearts of his people before God would come to consume them in his wrath and strike the land with a curse. And this

is precisely what John spent his time doing. He prepares the ways for God and his Messiah in such a way that, apart from John and his ministry, Jesus himself could not have accomplished what he was intended to accomplish by his Father. And so he cried out, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Flee from the wrath of the Coming One: the Messenger of the Covenant.”

But something happened which gave John some doubts. As he sat in prison, he heard the news that Jesus was not riding about victoriously in fire and wrath, meting out the vengeance of Almighty God upon the unjust. He had not purified Israel, beaten down her enemies, or enforced God’s law among the Gentiles. Instead, he had come teaching and healing, humble and mild, patient and merciful. John’s doubt is understandable, and Jesus answers his confusion by turning to Scripture.

You see, in Isaiah 35, one of those many passages which prophesied that the Messiah would bring the wrath and vengeance of God upon wicked doers when he came, God also speaks of giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, wholeness to the lame, and even life to the dead. Jesus tells John and the crowds who stand listening that the Baptist had no in fact erred: Jesus is the Messiah just as John had prophesied, since he is the one who is performing all these signs at his coming. And he the Messiah will in fact bring the vengeance, wrath, redemption, salvation, and deliverance that John had so passionately and eccentrically articulated beforehand. But, exactly how, and more importantly, when does this happen?

And here, beloved, we actually come to what this means for you and me. The Healer came with healing, but there is healing still yet to come, when he comes. The Avenger came, and beyond all understanding the vengeance of God was heaped upon him on the cross, but that means that there is a Day of Reckoning yet still to come. John’s ministry of proclaiming a Messiah to come may have been augmented and enhanced, but it still must be proclaimed by ministers of the Gospel who go before the King of kings and Lord of lords to prepare his way by telling the world that Jesus Christ, both God and Man, crucified and risen and ascended, is coming again quickly to judge the world, to raise the dead, and to bring “a New Heavens and a New Earth where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). It is not only important, it is necessary that we commission messengers to plead with men and women “to flee the wrath to come” through the only Savior Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:10).

And in some ways too, we each must be those messengers ourselves: we all must “go before the Lord to prepare his ways” just as John did (Luke 1:76)! We must have always his return on our minds, so that even as we cry out, “Come quickly, Lord Jesus,” we at the same time are his witnesses, his missionaries, and the senders of his missionaries in this world.

### **3. Meeting with the Lord Jesus.**

The second thing that we must note regarding God's heralds is that they meet with the Lord Jesus. Since he has come, a change has occurred: "the mystery hidden from long ages past has now been disclosed through the prophetic writings and manifested to all nations" (Romans 16:25-26). And this mystery requires "servants and stewards" (1 Corinthians 4:1) of an even greater character than John, becomes someone greater than he, "the sandals of whom he is unworthy to carry" (Matthew 3:11), has come. The difference between John and the Apostles (along with all ministers of the Gospel) is not simply wardrobe and diet: they inhabited two different epochs, since the Baptist was never a witness to Jesus' resurrection.

And so from the inauguration of the New Covenant until now, the one most essential feature of God's herald, his messenger, his preacher, and his missionary, is that they have "beheld the glory" of the risen Christ (John 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16-17). They have met with him, learned of him, and become (in short) his disciples and apprentices. And it is for this reason that "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven" will be greater than John, because John remains in that epoch of the Old Covenant in which both prophets and even angels "longed to look into the things" (1 Peter 1:10-12) that we now have access to through the complete and fulfilled news of what Jesus has done to save sinners in his life, death, and resurrection.

This is why John as a herald preparing the way for the Messiah was committed to turning his ministry over to Jesus after he came on the scene. In fact, he made his disciples follow Jesus, and silenced their complaints as the crowds followed after Jesus rather than after him. He gave up his place among the people and handed it over to the one whom he heralded. He decreased as Jesus increased, because John understood that it was Jesus. Period.

And this is what Jesus in fact does John's disciples: he turns them into his own messengers, his heralds to John and beyond. What is their message? Jesus says, "Go and report the things that you have heard and seen." Their encounter with the person, preaching, and power of Jesus Christ made them qualified and empowered witnesses of his identity and mission to John. Though they had been John's disciples, in this meeting with Jesus they became Jesus' disciples and thus messengers.

This is also pretty much the ministry of the Apostles. They testify, as John says, to what they have "heard, seen with our eyes, looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life" (1 John 1:1). Even Paul on the road to Damascus had an encounter with the glorified Jesus as he would come in glorious Majesty, an encounter which formed the basis of his testimony and mission's work all around the Mediterranean. They all preached Jesus Christ, Incarnate, Crucified, and Glorified, because they had met with him.

And this witness has not died with the Apostles, the Gospel has lived on, because these meetings continue to happen. You, I, and others may not have met with the glorified Lord Jesus in the flesh as the Apostles did, but we have met with him through their message in the power of the Holy Spirit, and having met with him we then go out with the same message. Our meeting may be different, but the content of our message is identical, with the same power that it had in the mouth of the Apostles, and it demands the same mission that they had. When we meet with Christ through his Word, through Prayer, and through Worship, we must embark as a part of his Mission.

I have witnessed the power of the message of this Jesus, my Jesus, so powerfully in my own life. I will never forget the evening that I entered the house of a Peruvian man and his son who had asked me to come over. I was in Peru for a few months serving as a pastoral intern, and it was one of the first times that someone had actually **asked** us to come over for a visit. As my companion and I were greeted in the door, I could see in the eyes of the man and his son a look of oppression and dangerous misery, and as we entered the eerie place that was their home, they began telling us a tale of woe that would break anyone's heart. Over the last several years, this man's business had been destroyed by a series of freak accidents, his wife had left him and taken their daughter with her, and he had learned that his accountant had been stealing from him and that he was bankrupt. He felt alone with a God who either refused to forgive his sins or who was powerless to defend him against his enemies, be they flesh and blood or power and principality.

It was at this point that I had to break the looming silence with a message. What message did I have? What could possibly give hope to this desperate man and his son in such a desperate situation? The only message I came with, could come with, was the Good News of Jesus Christ; and let me tell you, beloved: it was enough! It was nothing new, nothing fancy, but simply the comforting truth about God's love and Jesus' work for sinners. First, I told him that God loved him, had given his Son on the cross for him, and poured out all of his anger and wrath upon Jesus instead of upon him. In other words, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1), God has no more anger for the one who believes and trusts in Jesus for salvation. God had absolutely forgiven this man's sins, and these series of woes were not the vengeance of God for sins he had committed in the past or present.

Second, I told him that his Savior Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, and by his shed blood is able to defend him from both man and devil. So we prayed that the Lord would protect him against all evil, through in the powerful Name of Jesus and through his precious blood spilt for this man and his family. Now, I tell you, when we left that house that man and his son had changed completely. Hope and joy

radiated off of their faces. We who had met the risen Christ in the Gospel had helped them meet him as well, and they had come away transformed by the Good News, the “power of God unto salvation for all who believe” (Romans 1:16).

This is precisely what God call preachers, ministers, missionaries, and you as well to do: to meet the Lord, the God of your souls and bodies, in order to go forth in his Name and witness not just to what he will accomplish on the Last Day but also to what he has already accomplished sufficiently in his Son Jesus Christ. There is no greater message, and there is no greater honor than to be messengers of that message and heralds of that King.

#### **4. Returning to the Lord Jesus.**

The third that we must note regarding God’s heralds is that they return to the Lord Jesus. Heralds on earth are not the angels of heaven: they do not dwell in unapproachable light, nor have they yet tasted perfection, but they rather continue on this earth preparing the way with no small measure of setbacks and problems, just like John here.

To be honest, many good Christian preachers and scholars have had a hard time believing that John could have come to the level of doubt that this passage implies by the question that he puts to Jesus. Did Moses doubt? Absolutely! Did Elijah fear? Certainly! Did Jeremiah snivel and whine? Sure! But would John the Baptist have a moment of doubt about Jesus? Never!

After all, this was the man who was filled with the Holy Spirit from birth, who leaped in for joy in Elizabeth’s womb when a pregnant Virgin Mary drew near. This was the man who saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus, who heard the voice from heaven declaring this man to be his Son. He had proclaimed him, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” and had sent his disciples to follow after Jesus rather than after himself. This John could not have had a doubt like this, could he?

But not only is there no honest interpretive route around this conclusion, but it is actually essential to grasping Matthew’s meaning in this passage. We must understand that the man who had experienced and declared such things could have a moment of doubt even as a herald of the King. The messenger might sometimes doubt the message.

You see, John had had his idea of how he thought things would play out, and he found himself to be quite wrong. Not only did he think he might be wrong about Jesus, but he sat undergoing the suffering of awful imprisonment in Herod’s prison, soon to be executed on the whim of a dancing girl, all on behalf of the Truth. I submit to you that it is not only natural that John would have second thoughts; I also

suggest that it is written for our encouragement as we struggle with similar sins, doubts, and temptations.

But John does not wallow or moan in his doubt; instead, he takes action and returns to Jesus by way of these disciples. Rather than stumble on account of who Jesus is (and he is blessed because of it), he does not let the prison bars keep him from going to Jesus and getting the truth in the midst of confusion. In the midst of doubt he believes and returns to the Coming One who changed his life around, to the only one who can assure his heart of the faithfulness, goodness, and wisdom of God amidst the rocky events of his life.

And this is the mark today of a preacher, minister, missionary, or any other messenger on behalf of God as well. There are times when we fall into hardship, when we fall into doubt, or when we even contemplate despair. We messengers are miserable sinners before God. But God is rich in mercy, and it is in his Son Jesus that we find that mercy. A messenger of God must always stand in Christ, stand under his cross, and must return on his knees to the foot of that cross again and again. We are called to approach boldly the throne of grace so that we can be sent out from God's presence as we ought. The only trustworthy messenger and herald of the coming King is the one who keeps coming back to the Lord Jesus.

This is what I have had to do myself on the mission field during previous periods of service. I have wrestled with culture shock, temptations, depression, and my own inadequacies and failings which crop up so quickly, frequently, and powerfully when we are serving God beyond our "comfort zones." But when I go to Jesus, not only does he forgive me, but he redeems those lowest moments for his glory, and uses them for his purposes and mission in the world. After all, when Jesus sends his message to John, the net gain is enormous since not only was John's heart encouraged, but so were his disciples, so were the crowds, and so, beloved, are you. Just as God received greater glory in the midst of the Baptist's doubts, so in our lives God can receive greater glory when we offer up to him our struggles, pains, sorrows, failings, weaknesses, and sins to be used by him as he sees fit. This all means that you must return to him again, and again, and again.

Let us run to Jesus, let us hang upon him who hung upon the cross for us, let us find our rest in him, because it is only in returning that there can be restoration, empowerment, and fulfillment of God's purposes in our life. And in particular, let us seek to encourage our own pastors, leaders, and missionaries, those who have been God's messengers and heralds in our own life, to continually return to the God whom they love, preach, and serve on our behalf. Let us remind them to be fed and strengthened, chastened and encouraged by that Friend of sinners who is always ready to be found and who more often than not does the finding.

## **5. Conclusion.**

As we wrap things up here, I will begin by making a shameless plug for my own missionary endeavors. Please, consider being a part of God's mission not only in your own backyard but also in what he is doing on the other side of the world in Buenos Aires, Argentina, both through prayer and through giving. When God calls people to go, he also calls people to be involved in the sending. I ask you to pray and to consider whether the Lord might be calling you to be involved in the process in my own missionary adventures.

But let me continue on to something which is even more important: my prayer for you this morning is that these three activities, of going before, meeting with, and returning to Jesus will be your activities as well. I pray that as baptized Christians you will like Paul be commissioned even as you are converted, that you will be his mouth and hands and feet as you serve him in this world as the heralds of the King who comes. May you like John "be called the prophet of the Highest, for thou shalt go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation unto his people for the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, whereby the Dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:76-79). Amen.

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Third Sunday of Advent (2010)  
San Diego, California