

**Sermon: December 3, 2017 (Advent 2) – John 1: 6-8, 19-28.  
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

I freely admit to having been a sports nerd most of my life. I was one of those low-skill, high-commitment kids who would spend most of the winter out on the street with a hockey stick in my hand, boots on my feet, two blocks of frozen slush off the bottom of cars as our goal posts, everyone watching for vehicles and yelling CAR! when it was time to make room. In my spare time, my brother and I had a continuous subscription to *The Hockey News* for nearly forty years, and long before the present-day fascination with hockey analytics I would pour over the statistics and trades and draft lists, imagining, predicting and calculating who would have the best team next season. Doing that research, forecasting, guessing was quite a bit of fun: so much so that at times, the actual season itself was a bit of a letdown – especially if the teams I predicted had really improved themselves, were cellar-dwellers once they actually pulled on their skates. My interest was mainly in the *preparation* and the *possibility*. With so much invested in the anticipation, at times the playing of the games was secondary, even deflating.

I share that as an example of the difference between our *preparations* for something, and *the event itself*, between *anticipating* something, and actually *living* it. At times, we can put so much effort into the preparation that we are worn out by the time the main event arrives. (I can think of a few Christmases over the years that would fit that category). Or perhaps we get so focused on the preliminaries that we forget the reasons for doing any of it, the actual goals or outcomes we are seeking – as the saying goes, we can't see the forest, for the trees.

Today we spend our second consecutive Sunday with John the Baptist. As big and strange and outrageous a character as John was, he was a true fan favourite. People flocked to him because he was a big personality, who was, in spite of his denials, very much a throwback to Elijah and all that Elijah symbolized, a man who was valued because he was, as we focused on last week, a truth-teller. Many of the common-folk of Judea were well-aware of how messed up their nation was, politically and spiritually, and into that churning mix of things walks this unclean, unshaved wildman, shouting at them to leave these unsatisfying ways and make a new path for God. This seemed to them, like the answer to all their problems, so much so that throughout the days of the early Church there were still pockets of people who believed that John, not Jesus, was the Messiah.

But John understood with complete clarity, that he was *not* the Messiah – he was not the answer to their prayers, or at least not those *big* prayers. **He was only the guy pointing them toward the one where they could get their answers**, a relative of his named Jesus of Nazareth, who was the promised one they had been waiting for. **John was the “preparation” guy, while Jesus was the “depth plus action” guy.** John got them ready, so that they could go deeper with Jesus and actually do something of benefit to the world. John was the trainer who helped them become spiritually fit, then Jesus was the skilled, attentive guide who took them out on the trail. John was an extremely important person to the spiritual mission of Jesus, because the spiritual boot camp he would put people through would get them ready for the actual work of unconditional love, but it was Jesus who would take those ready souls, and fill them with a vision of a new world of peace and justice, and equip them to become agents for God's own healing power, and put them to work for the greater common good.

It may seem super-obvious, that preparations are nothing more than preparatory; they aren't the main event. John is just the one getting people ready, it's the work they do with Jesus that makes the actual difference. But so often in life, our focus is in so close that we forget about the bigger goals of our lives, and that loss of the bigger sense of things can happen to an individual or a congregation or even a nation.

Sometimes, life is so challenging that it is hard to even think of anything past the basics. We see that in the Valley all the time: young families that are here because they want their children to live healthy, outdoorsy lives in the presence of God's spectacular mountains, end up working extra jobs and extra hours to afford living here, which diminishes their ability to fulfill any of those bigger dreams. We see it, also, in the lives of people with chronic health challenges, and in entire nations of people who live in the shadow of war or famine or widespread under-employment: the more marginal things get, the less you can think about any goals beyond survival. Knowing that many people do live with these limitations, is good reason for those of us who *do* have a greater range of choices, to recommit our efforts toward a world where the big Jesus-related goals of hope, peace, joy and love are understood as common gifts for all people in all lands, not only for those who can afford them.

It is important that, as much as we can in our circumstances, we not get caught up in the small stuff, that we not be overwhelmed by the anxieties of the moment, that we not get so self-involved that the big picture becomes invisible. The more we can picture our lives as part of something bigger – the more we can see what we are doing as part of God’s big activity in the world – the better. Consultant Dan Zadra uses this illustration:

“In his book, *Teaching the Elephant to Dance*, author Jim Belasco tells the story of Dr. Denton Cooley, the famous heart surgeon. One day Belasco followed Dr. Cooley on his rounds and, en route to the operating room, saw the surgeon stop and talk to a janitor mopping the hallway. The two men conversed for nearly ten minutes before Dr. Cooley dashed into the ER. Curious, Belasco walked over to the man with the mop and said, ‘That was a long conversation.’

“The man replied, ‘Yes, Dr. Cooley and I talk quite often.’

“Then Belasco asked, ‘What exactly do you do at the hospital?’

“The man replied, ‘We save lives.’”

That sense of everyone working toward a greater purpose is what propels an organization from being competent or capable to being cutting-edge and excellent, it’s what changes a town from being an okay place to live to a place you speak of with pride. And to answer a question put forward in *the Observer* a few months ago, understanding each small action and each larger agenda we do as a congregation, as being part of Christ’s hopes for a world where every life is surrounded by and infused with love, is what makes us a congregation and not a social club. The argument that says that the only thing that matters in Church life, is doing good rather than believing in God, is setting up a false choice between two things that are both essential. Each action we undertake, each word we speak, does something immediate and in-close *while simultaneously serving the greater purpose* of hoping beyond hope that God’s holy power of love can shape and infuse the life of the world. **Our religious life is a matter of both/and, not either/or:** we do what we do, because we have committed ourselves to Christ’s horizon line of love. To use that example from Dan Zadra once more, I give my best to mopping the floor because I want this hospital to bring its best to the goal of saving lives. People who thought they had done the entire job once they had done the prep work required by John the Baptist, straightening out their own lives, getting good with God, were clearly told that *this was just the first step*; their real mission, was taking that readiness and hitting the road as disciples of Jesus. Or as Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber would put it,

“John says to them ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Get ready for something new. Because, there is one who is coming who will change everything’. And the way in which John the Baptist prepares the people for the Gospel is by making room for it through washing away their old ideas and expectations. The untruth and sin and shame and all competing identities float away in the Jordan because the real thing was finally here. Because in Jesus, God is doing a new thing - not to make us *good* but to make us *new*.”

In case some of this sounds more like a business productivity concept than something that Jesus would actually call us toward, remember the time when someone well-versed in the laws of the Hebrew Scripture came to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answers, with two laws from outside the ten commandments, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22: 36-40, NRSV) Jesus links these two commandments hand-in-glove: as we serve the needs of the poor, as we work with dedication to change systems that oppress, **the words and deeds focused on helping our neighbour simultaneously show our commitment to the God of love.** Or as we heard two weeks ago in that stark reading from Matthew 25, whatever we do unto “the least of these” we do directly to Christ. Our practical lives, our simple choices, are not separate from our identity as children of God. The depth we find in our spiritual lives, and the way we reach out to the community around us, are both within one process, the way we treat our neighbour is a direct expression of what we think of God. Love of God is shown by love of neighbour, love of neighbour expresses our belief that God is love.

And again, we return to John the Baptist, doing the prep work and pointing people not to himself, but Jesus. Just so it doesn't go unsaid this morning, let me say out loud how important that prep work is, even if it isn't the final goal. The gospel is unflinching in its understanding that Jesus, not John is "the one," but if you skip over John's hard work of change it will be hard to sustain the transformation called for by Jesus. So if your life is in the grips of rage, or controlled by the bottle or by pain medications, that has to change, through twelve-stepping and/or detox if any of the other good things in life are going to ever be accessible to you or your family. If your days are consumed by worry or unresolved grief, if cognitive distortions skew the way you react to daily challenges, you need to find a skilled guide to help you release those things and find new ways. If your days never include self-reflection, prayer, scripture, and other thoughtful reading, you're missing out on the abundance that comes with an "examined" life. And those things you know would make your life better – more exercise, better eating, smarter choices in entertainment – well, yes, they too would help you get more out of life. All of these need attending to, but none of these things is a final goal; each of them prepares us to enter into that great adventure, of living with a strong and fearless love that is not satisfied until everyone in sight knows that they are welcomed, and included, and loved. All the work that goes into skill development, and learning, and practicing and rehearsing, is not an end in itself: it prepares you to *do* something. Which, in the case of the religious/spiritual life, is to enter into the very heart of God: **to love one another, as Christ has loved us.**

John understands the value of preparation. He also knows how popular he is, and the value of humility. He perhaps overstates the fact by denying that he is a present-day Elijah, saying his importance is no more than that of the lowest household servant who *would have to work up to the job* that would allow him to tie his master's sandal strap, and he over-states this because he wants the people to have their attention, not on him but on Jesus... who, in turn, always points beyond himself, to the loving power of God. Years ago, I was at a talk where the speaker, Millard Fuller, was introduced not by name, but simply as "CEO of Habitat for Humanity." He came out on stage, surveyed the crowd and said, "y'all thought you were going to see Jimmy Carter, didn't you?" And then he continued, with words that cross my mind nearly every day: "I'm fine with not being a household name, because years of house-building has proven to us what others have said before us - that **great things can be accomplished when nobody cares who gets the credit**" *That's* what John the Baptist understood: Christ's new age of shalom, peace and love and harmony experienced by all creation, is what mattered, not John's personal popularity. If credit is to be received at all, it gets received by God, not us. And as a Church, I think we *mostly* get that, too: the changes we can help to begin in people's hearts and lives is what matters. We name and celebrate places where we see some success, not out of ego, but to express gratitude to those who have made the effort to help, and to express joy at the way that God's name is praised when positive changes are seen in people's lives. While it's nice to be acknowledged, the important thing is whether our actions are contributing to some degree of loving, transformative change, and if it is, then it's all good. As popular as John the Baptist was, and as important as his prep work was and is, he always understood that the glory went elsewhere.

We listen to John the Baptist calling us to examine our lives, we seek change where change is needed, and we understand that all of it – **all of it** – points to a bigger commitment, to Christ's new way of radical, active, astonishing love. May the small choices and the big choices we make, always point us in that direction. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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{quote by Mr Fuller was first attributed to Charles E. Montague, 1922 – then Harry Truman, John Wooden and others}

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