

IT'S ABOUT JESUS!

December 4, 2011

I don't know how he knew, but if there was food, Sam showed up at church. Sam had wild, frizzy, long, filthy gray hair and a beard to match. Sam's breath was putrid with rotting teeth. Sam dressed in layer upon layer of filthy, ragged clothes. And with him he carried an assortment of bags filled with all his treasures; treasures that for us would seem too disgusting to touch. Sam made his home – his bed – in the lifeless hulk of an abandoned car.

Now Sam's appearance was sensational, scary, off-putting. But it was also deceiving because, as crude as Sam appeared, he was cultured, and he was intelligent, and he was engaging and, indeed, he was even charming. You won't believe it, but Sam had once been a member of the faculty of Washington University in St. Louis – a professor of mathematics. But Sam dropped out. Sam became a survivalist.

And so I'm remembering Sam this morning because Sam makes me wonder about John the Baptist. What did John the Baptist do before he dropped out? Where did John live before he camped out in the wilderness? What was John once...you know, before all that stuff? Was he a shepherd? Was he a merchant? Was he a craftsman? Was he a Pharisee? Was he a rabbi? Whatever he'd been, John surely had a past with some significance to it because he was pretty well prepared to be a sensational, pulpit-pounding preacher who shouted out a message of change; a message of change that he preached from the deep fringes of society to transform its core and to renew the hearts of the people who were enmeshed in it.

You know, it's not easy to live in the wilderness, because the wilderness is a place of scarcity, and in the wilderness we have to trust God completely because there's no one or nothing else to trust. My guess is that John would have likely rather done anything else but this. Yet God had gotten hold of John's life...and God wasn't letting go.

John had a pretty simple message for those who came to hear him preach and to get baptized. John said:

This is not about me. It's about Jesus.

It's about how we can change.

It's about how we can prepare the way for Jesus to come into the world...and not just into the world, but into the lives of God's children...and not in just the lives of God's children, but into our own hearts.

Sam had a past...John had a past...and so do each one of us. We all have a past. Some of you know that part of my past was that I was supposed to be an electrical engineer. In high school, I received the Bausch and Lomb Award. (I don't know where it is.) I was one of six high schoolers in the whole state of Illinois who was sent to tour the Bell Labs in Murray Hill, New Jersey. And I wasn't just offered a tour; I was also offered a pretty significant scholarship to the University of Rochester in a serious attempt to recruit me and those other five for the team at the Bell Labs.

It almost worked...but God had other ideas. And even though I really didn't want it...even though I tried very hard to say *NO*...God called me to ministry. God had gotten hold of my life...and God wasn't letting go.

If I'm honest with you this morning, I have to tell you that sometimes I've wished in this past month that God hadn't derailed my electrical engineer future...that I hadn't traded in my slide rule for a Bible. I'm not like John. God didn't put me in the wilderness on a tree stump pulpit. God put me here, in this venerable church that's been at the heart of Green Bay for the last hundred and seventy-six years. And, since Peggy's resignation, it's been a tough time; a tough time for this church and for many of us in it. So I've been worrying, and maybe you have, too. The truth is that this sermon was written at 3 a.m. yesterday morning when I wasn't sleeping. Some of us have gotten all caught up in a swirl of information and sometimes speculation about what's happened, and why, and who and what are to blame.

In this time...and I think *especially* in this time...John's message comes storming graciously into our lives...and into the life of Union Church. Listen to what John says.

First, John is clear about who he's not. John says: *I'm not the Messiah. The message I'm preaching is not about me. It's about Jesus.* That means that this pulpit is not about Chuck Mize, or Charles Bagby, or Leonard Parr, or Jeremiah Porter (who's got his Santa hat on today!), or any of the other 21 ministers and 10 or so associate ministers who have served this church. It's about Jesus.

And the same is true for the purpose of this church. Our only legitimate and life-giving purpose is to follow and serve Jesus. If we lose that purpose...if we lose God...then we lose hope, and we lose our very life. It's about Jesus! And in that, friends, there is such great freedom! It means that we don't need to take ourselves too seriously and that we can resist being seduced by our own self importance. You see, our lives are about so much more than just ourselves! Our lives, like John's, are about Jesus. They're about the life that is life indeed!

First, John is clear about who he's not. Second, John is clear that we can change. John's word is *repent*. And what good news that word is! We aren't condemned, you see, to be who we've always been. We aren't destined to live today and tomorrow in the prisons of our yesterdays. We can change. We can prepare the way for Jesus. We can follow Jesus and serve Him today and tomorrow. We can change.

And finally, John tells us what change means. In the gospel of Luke, John spells it out pretty specifically. He says: If you have two coats, give one away. If you have power over others – a tax collector or a soldier – don't use your power to cheat, and to rob, and to steal. Those things are pretty specific, and simple and manageable.

And we have a great opportunity to practice it right here at Union Church today. *If you have two coats, give one away.* Well today it's not coats for us...it's God's creatures that we can use to pass on the gift. At our Heifer Living Gift Market, we can do something new. We can change. Instead of adding to the possession load of loved ones and friends with things that will eventually find their way to the rummage sale, or to Goodwill, or to the Salvation Army, or to St. Vincent De Paul, we can give something that literally saves lives and changes them through Heifer International. It's one of the best ways that we can give Jesus to others and prepare the way.

John never minced his words. John said: *It's not about me. It is about Jesus. It's about how Jesus is changing us. It's about preparing a way for Him in our world and a place for Him in our hearts.*

You know, friends, hopelessness breeds hopelessness. Suspicion breeds suspicion. Despair breeds despair. But faith breeds faith. And hope breeds hope. There's a popular message that churches repeat in this season of the year. They say often: *Keep Christ in Christmas.* There's a more important message for us to share: *Put Jesus in your lives.*

When God's grace lets us let go of thinking that it's all about us...when God's grace convinces us that it's about Jesus...we're well on our way to becoming the disciples and the church God wants us to be...disciples and a church who know the joy of preparing the way of the Lord. Yes, it's true. It is about Jesus! Amen.

Charles E. Mize
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2011