

January 3, 2021
Second Sunday after Christmas

Let's Take A Walk

Peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I think you have heard the song before and the verse of that song for today goes something like this; On the 10th day of Christmas, my true love gave to me 10 lords a leaping. And then you know 9 ladies dancing, 8 maids milking, etc. etc. It is oftentimes known as one of the most obnoxious Christmas carols there is and yet it has a deeply Christian background to it. The 10 Lords a leaping actually, is a reference to the 10 commandments. But here we are, it is January 3rd. We are in the 2nd Sunday after Christmas, the 10th day of Christmas and yet we are January 3rd, it's a New Year the first Sunday of the new year and this Wednesday is Epiphany, the beginning of the next season of the church year. The dilemma for the pastor is what do you do on this day. Do you focus on Christmas? Do you focus on New Years, or do you focus on Epiphany? And well, how about doing all three and trying to do it in a sermon that is 20 minutes or less? We are going to take a little walk or run, shall we say, into the new year.

We are going to start with Epiphany. Epiphany the word that literally means, a new understanding or an awakening; or you know the announcement of something totally new. When we look at the words of Jesus this morning, it's my hope that we have a little bit of an epiphany. In perspective, if you think of the year we have just been through; the year of pandemic, civil unrest, division, political mayhem, and disregard in many cases for citizens, and elitism of the politically elected; a time of economic strife. It is good for us to remember what Jesus said. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. And Jesus tells us why He will never cast out anyone who comes to Him. For this is the will of my Father. It's the will of the Father, of God the Father. Christ came to save us. And so, Jesus continues and says it's the will of my Father that I shall lose nothing of all that He has given me, and that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life.

Here's the epiphany, a new understanding or maybe a reinforcement of an understanding we already have. Whoever comes to Jesus will not be cast out. And so putting it into the perspective our pandemic year and going into a new year that starting with pandemic and all; come to Jesus. There is a focus for the New Year. Come to Jesus! Because as we just heard, He won't lose any of those who are given to Him. And so instead of focusing a loss, we can focus on gain. Gaining for our Lord in the new year as we look to Him. Gaining souls for Christ, expanding the Kingdom. Now I know some might be thinking pastor Matt we have been trying so hard over the last 20 years to do that. We have been trying, trying, trying and look around you in this pandemic, our church that can seat 500 or so is maybe a tenth full. It is hopeless. How in the world can we gain?

That's where I think it's time to take a walk through Christmas and look at some of the main characters in Christmas. For instance, let's take a look at John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. The wilderness, how many of you would want to live in the wilderness? The wilderness is not a real comfortable place and I know there are some of you who might say, 'yeah but I like going out in the wilderness and you know getting out there with a camper, or in a tent. You know just getting away from everything. But living there, and let's put it into the perspective of John the Baptist, living there with the diet of locust and wild honey and no company. No one with you, just by yourself; that's not a real comfortable place. You see, to be in the wilderness, John the Baptist gave up a lot. For us, the wilderness may mean giving up home, career, family, friends. Wilderness, the wilderness is traditionally a place where it is good for God and for us. There is no competition in the wilderness, no distractions from his work. And perhaps, just maybe perhaps our Lord is using COVID-19 as our wilderness. A place and time to focus without distractions of having to go to the store or having to this or having to that; to focus on His words and really hear. "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, I will give you rest." And I think all of us have a certain feeling of a heavy burden on us. With everything I mentioned before that we had in 2020, the pandemic, the civil unrest, the division in our country, all the political nonsense. All of it, just putting it together the shutdown, economic strife, I think we are all burdened by that. Come to me all who labor, labor in His field, I will give you rest.

Like John, I believe it is a time, in this new year, for us to embrace the wilderness and use it by focusing on Christ and focusing on His ministry.

Second on our walk we come to Joseph. Joseph, in the Christmas account was put in a nightmare situation. It wasn't his fault his fiancée was pregnant. What was he to do with that? He knew he wasn't the father. And according to Jewish law, there were really only two options number one was to call her out. You have committed adultery, and take it to the governing authorities, the religious authorities and Mary would be stoned. The second option was to divorce her. Again, I think most of you remember that for the Jewish people once you are engaged the knot is tied. To break the engagement requires a divorce. And so he could divorce her and in doing so, he could do it very publicly which would shame Mary. And it be like that woman in the story of the scarlet letter. She would always bear that burden. Or he could do it quietly. Did you know Joseph loved Mary? He didn't want her stoned, he didn't want her shamed, he had put it in his mind to divorce her quietly. And yet we read that there was a third option. It was an option that evidently Joseph didn't think of, and that Jewish law did not provide for. The third option was revealed to Joseph in a dream. Take Mary to be his wife, take Jesus as his son. Now this requires sheer grace, and sheer obedience, and sheer trust in God. It also meant that by trusting God and by taking Mary as his wife and showing his love for her, being obedient to God, that he would probably experience public ridicule. He'd be blamed for either being the father of this son out of wedlock, or a weak man. He just couldn't say no to her. Oh, that poor Joseph, he's going to be stuck with her, this demanding wife, all his life. But for us, whatever our history, whatever our plans, we need to ask, "what's the third option?" What is God's option for us? It may not be something that is even in our mind. Like Joseph, we become obedient.

Which leads us to Mary, the one who was engaged. Think about that, a young woman engaged, what is her mind on? Excitement. It is time to prepare for a wedding. A time to make this beautiful wedding and enjoy the wedding and embark on a journey of the rest of her life with the one she loves. And her life was totally undone when the Angel Gabriel came. I would imagine sheep in any way I imagine the outcome. Think about it! God's option involved first of all pregnancy before she

was married, no wedding of any great sort, traveling to Egypt for your honeymoon because there's a death sentence on the baby, then coming back and moving to Nazareth because it's way out in the middle of nowhere where Herod wouldn't find the child. There is Mary, and like us today, like Mary, we need to take whatever God's plan is embrace it, be obedient and like Mary, rejoice. Think about it, when Mary heard these words from the Angel Gabriel her first thing was to embrace it. "I am the servant of the LORD." Her second thing was to be obedient, 'let it be to me according to your word.' And then she rejoiced, 'my soul magnifies the LORD.'

Remember those words, embrace, obedient, rejoice. Because we are in our own wilderness called by God, and we are to embrace that wilderness, be obedient to his call and rejoice in it. But we can only do that if we first focus on Him, come to Him; knowing that if we come to Him, He won't lose us. He will give us rest. Knowing He might give us a third option. We just need to look for it and to be perfectly honest I think we may already see it as we look at working with other churches and welcoming them and saying, 'brother, sister.' Pooling our resources, whereby we grow. We grow in a physical footprint all the way out to Jackson and maybe Pine Grove and beyond, up Hwy 88 or Sutter Creek or Mokelumne Hill, Valley Springs, maybe South Lodi, maybe Valley Home, maybe West Lodi. Who knows? Exciting things have already happened. We come to our Lord, He will give us an option that will bless Him, praise Him. Expand His Kingdom and bring Salvation to all.

But also, as Paul mentioned in our reading this morning, peace. Peace, that passes all human understanding. And so, we focus on those things that Paul told us to focus on, those things that are commendable. Serving our Lord is commendable.

But finally, it brings us back to the message of Christmas again. Immanuel, as we go into this year, in this pandemic wilderness, a year possibly of great unity; to know that He is right there with us, walking with us. And if we just come to Him grab His hand, follow Him with all our heart, soul, and mind; this will be a very bright year.

In our Savior's Name, Amen