**Advent: *The Season of Joy***

**Sunday December 8, 2019**

**Advent 2: “Prepare the Way” (Matthew 3:1-12)**

**1. Introduction: *It’s a Wonderful Life***

Each Christmas I make a wish list of Christmas movies that I would like to watch over the holidays, but oftentimes the various Christmas activities put a damper on my plans for a Christmas film festival. Yet, I still manage to find the time to watch one of my all time favourites – *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946). For those who haven’t seen it, the story centres on George Bailey, a kind-hearted man whose business partner has accidentally lost $8000 of the company’s money. Desperate, George contemplates committing suicide, but is stopped by Clarence, his guardian angel, who tries to persuade him that his life has had a positive impact on many people. Unconvinced, George declares that everybody would be better off if he’d never been born. In response to this pessimistic statement, Clarence shows George a dark and desolate alternative world where he was never born. In the end, George realizes that life is worth living.

 The film opened in Christmas 1946. Upon release, the film got mixed reviews with most of the critics giving it a ‘thumbs down’. They didn’t hate the film, but they dismissed it as too sentimental, unrealistic and predictable. The film didn’t turn out to be the big hit that the studio hoped it would. Although it was not successful when it was first released, it experienced a second wind as new audiences fell in love with it when it was regularly aired on TV in the 1970’s and 80’s. Not only has it subsequently received critical acclaim; it also has become one of the most celebrated Christmas movies ever made. I remember first watching it on TVO in late ‘70s and absolutely loving it!

 Six months after the movie was first released, it did catch the attention of the FBI. In the midst of the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era, the bureau declared that the movie might have some ties to Communism. They claimed that the film’s antagonist, Mr. Potter portrayed bankers as Scrooge-like and crooked and that this was a common trick used by Communists to discredit the banking industry. While I don’t believe that *It’s a Wonderful Life* was a Communist plot, I do acknowledge its obvious critique of heartless greed that has no concern for human life. The town’s richest man, Mr. Potter is a poster boy for this kind of attitude.

 When Mr. Potter attempts to shut down his George’s father’s company, which built affordable homes and provided reasonable mortgages for working class folks, George confronts Mr. Potter: “What'd you say a minute ago? That people had to wait and save their money before they even ought to think of a decent home. Wait? Wait for what? Until their children grow up and leave them? Until they're too old and broken down? Do you know how long it takes a working man to save $5,000? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you're talking about, they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. *People were human beings to him. But to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well in my book, my father died a much richer man than you'll ever be!”*

In this dramatic moment, George speaks the truth to power with a prophet-like voice that resonates from the movie screen. He stands up to Mr. Potter and calls him out for his heartless attitude toward others, declaring that there is a better way of living. This morning’s Gospel lesson features someone who also spoke the truth to power and confronted the wrong in his world. In preparation for the coming of the Messiah, John the Baptist called all the people to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). But he was especially forthright with the most powerful people in his society, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, calling them a “brood of snakes,” and challenging them to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8).

 Last Sunday we learned that *Advent* means “coming,” and during this season we reflect upon the *three* Advents of Christ: in Bethlehem as a baby, within our lives spiritually, and at the end of time in glory and majesty. On this second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord by calling each one of us to *repent*, to turn from our sin and turn to God in true faith and commitment. In so doing, we prepare our hearts for the Advent of Christ. The joy and the challenge of Advent is that in Jesus Christ our God is coming, and our aching and longing for God will be met. Yet Christ’s coming into our lives and into our world will undoubtedly challenge the status quo and disturb our complacency. Are we prepared for this kind of Advent?

**2. The Voice Crying in the Wilderness: *Prepare the Way for the Lord***

As Matthew 3 opens, we are introduced to the wild and wonderful John the Baptist who boldly proclaims, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*” (Matthew 3:2). Matthew points out that John’s life and ministry were in fulfilment of the words of Isaiah the prophet - “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him’” (Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3). John’s fearless preaching prepared the way for the Lord’s coming as many people came out to Judean wilderness to be baptized by him (Matthew 3:5).

 A wide spectrum of the Jewish population responded to John’s message, but in this passage Matthew records a particular interaction with a specific group of people, the religious elite (Matthew 3:7-12). In this exchange, John was not addressing ordinary folks, but the important, the powerful and the influential - the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were a group of prominent Jews who strove to interpret and apply the Torah to every facet of life. The Sadducees were an aristocratic group of Jews who were responsible for the proper administration of the Temple, presided over the Jewish high court, and maintained positive political relations with the Roman Empire. The Pharisees had power over the interpretation and application of the Scriptures. The Sadducees had power over the principal religious and political institutions of the nation.

 When John saw some Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized, he spoke the truth to the powerful: “*Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference?* *It’s your life that must change, not your skin!*” (Matthew 3:7-8, *The Message*). Other translations use the more familiar terminology, “*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*.” John, sceptical of motives of these religious leaders, was warning them that true repentance was more than just getting into Jordan River and having water splash on them, it entailed a significant change of the direction of their lives. Repentance is more than feeling remorse or confessing one’s sins. It entails a radical change of course that will significantly impact the way one lives.

 For these people who wielded considerable religious, cultural and political power, this was a fairly tall order because they had a lot to lose. In turning to God, they might have to abandon the ways that they used their authority to take advantage of others. They might have to renounce their positions of privilege that perpetuated inequality and oppression in their society. They might have to admit to themselves, to the people and to God that they were sinners and in need of God’s forgiveness. They could no longer use the mask of religion to portray themselves as sinless or untouchable. They couldn’t rest on their religious laurels by declaring, “We’re safe – we’re descendants of Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). John was calling them to repent for the kingdom of God was near.

 I totally understand how easy it was for the Pharisees and the Sadducees to be confident in their religious standing because, after all, they were the *chosen people*, *the children of Abraham*. And furthermore, these guys were exceptionally pious, standing head and shoulders above everyone else in terms of their commitment to God. So they had good reason to suppose that their spiritual lives were on track. Yet John, the voice in the wilderness, challenged their spiritual arrogance and he challenges us too.

 John speaks to us because we need a wake up call from our spiritual complacency. We can breeze through our days and weeks without thinking much about God. On some Sundays we might go through the motions of church, thinking that we’re serving God, while our hearts are elsewhere. Some days, we’re Christians in theory but atheists in practice. But God wants so much more. He wants our hearts and lives. Now is not the time to rest on our spiritual laurels by saying, “I’ve been a Baptist all my life” or “I’ve been a member of this church for 30 years,” or “I grew up in a Christian home,” or “I’m a pastor.” Now is the time to pause and reflect on the condition of our lives before God. John declares, “*What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire*” (Matthew 3:10).

 When we hear John’s words we should be filled with the desire for God to produce the kind of fruit in our lives that shows that we have turned from our sinful, self-centred way of life and have completely surrendered to God. This Advent we must ask ourselves: What I am holding onto that keeps me from being more committed to God? What is God asking me to give up so that he can work in my life? What do I need to leave behind in order to turn to God fully? What am I looking for this Advent?

 Christian poet, Ann Weems has written this beautiful Advent poem entitled “Finding our Kneeling Places”:

*In each heart lies a Bethlehem,*

*an inn where we must ultimately answer*

*whether there is room or not.*

*When we are Bethlehem-bound*

*we experience our own advent in his.*

*When we are Bethlehem-bound*

*we can no longer look the other way*

*conveniently not seeing stars*

*not hearing angel voices.*

*We can no longer excuse ourselves by busily*

*tending our sheep or our kingdoms.*

*This Advent let’s go to Bethlehem*

*and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us.*

*In the midst of our shopping sprees*

*let’s ponder in our hearts the Gift of Gifts.*

*Through the tinsel*

*let’s look for the gold of the Christmas Star.*

*In the excitement and confusion, in the merry chaos,*

*let’s listen for the brush of angels’ wings*

*This Advent, let’s go to Bethlehem*

*and find our kneeling places.*

(Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem,* p. 19).

 This Advent, may the words of that marvellous hymn, *Joy to the Word,* become a reality in our lives - “Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King*. Let every heart prepare Him room.*”