

Series: Come, Let Us Adore Him
Sermon: Passion
Scripture: Luke 3:1-6

Second Sunday of Advent
December 8, 2024
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1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

I know this may seem crazy, but bear with me as I explain why there are visions of a late 1980's Saturday Night Live sketch in my head. Perhaps you remember them too...Hanz and Franz...played by Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon. The Hanz and Franz characters were two Austrian brothers who were there to "Pump You Up" and make you more tough and "manly." Their bit was based on Arnold Schwarzenegger and his body building career and showed the power of being passionate about something. Body builders are passionate about image and weightlifting goals...and some...like Hanz and Franz showed us...can take their passions to extreme levels, trying to convince others to be as passionate as they are about something, and for them, taking it one step further by ridiculing anyone who wasn't as passionate as they were.

Sometimes when I picture John the Baptist, it is Hanz and Franz that come to mind. John the Baptist, basically offered a spiritual version of "Pump you up" – working to get the world passionate about turning their lives over to God. To be passionate about something is to be enthusiastic about it. We develop a passion for things that excite us or inspire us...things that we want to dedicate ourselves to. In the case of Hanz and Franz, they plugged the "no pain, no gain" concept of body building...you have to be tough, devoted, willing to embrace the pain and live a disciplined lifestyle in order to reach your goals.

In the case of John the Baptist, he taught that passion for God, if lived with discipline and intentionality, would result in a life of spiritual muscle...the kind of muscle that helps us to endure pain and suffering...the kind of muscle that helps us stand tall when the world tries to knock us down...the kind of muscle that helps us keep our faith when everyone around us tries to push us in another direction...the kind of muscle that we become passionate about strengthening and nurturing. It is a kind of muscle that is

very different than what Hanz and Franz promoted. A muscle and power altogether different than that being experienced in Luke's world.

I love that Luke begins his story about John by rooting us in history. I often hear people criticize preachers for being too political, but the truth is, our Gospel's are rooted in political context. We can't understand the power of God without acknowledging the power that is NOT God. Luke begins by showing us who the worldly powers are...all representatives of foreign domination. The movers and shakers in the room where it happens...the men who are living in palaces and meeting in grand halls and dictating rules and issuing judgements...the men who are determining the way of the world and making it difficult for the people who are left to navigate the deep valleys of oppression and the crooked paths of injustice. Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas...many of the names we will hear again in the story of Jesus' crucifixion.

We can imagine it like the beginning of a movie, the camera footage sweeping us thorough the great palaces and halls, showing all the power moves taking places....and then out the door, spanning over the city, across the tops of trees, out into the wilderness where it zooms in on a wild man with strange clothes and honey stuck in his beard, standing at the edge of a river and yelling for the people to repent...promising a thing that none of the powerbrokers of Rome can offer...forgiveness...a chance for a new start...an opportunity to a life of freedom...a promise for peace of mind and renewal of heart.

In a most unlikely place, from a most unlikely man, comes the passionate call for radical change and a whole new way of approaching life and how we think about purpose and calling. John the Baptist offers us a chance to see that passion happens on the edges, in the wilderness where worldly power is stripped away and we see only Jesus, who offers a straight and level path to God's peace.

- *Prepare the way of the Lord* – John's call is one of accountability and preparation – how do we live life preparing for Jesus to reside there...in us...among us?
- *Make his paths straight* – how do we passionately give ourselves to Jesus so that we do not stray or wander in and out of his will?
- *Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain shall be made low* - How do we live in such a way that we allow God to lift us from our lowliness and protect us from the rise to arrogance and self-importance?
- *The crooked shall be made straight and the rough places smooth* – How do we live in a way that keeps us focused and empowered to overcome our rough spots and live passionately for God?

And in doing this...how is it all flesh shall see God's salvation?

Because repentance doesn't just change what we believe, it changes how we behave. It isn't just that we are a dwelling place for Jesus, or that we are focused and passionate about living a life devoted to God and embracing God's ability to balance our living...but it means we will be a person who becomes passionate about living in ways that offer that truth to others...

- Ways that offer others the forgiveness we have received
- Ways that help look at others as equal, not lower and to be condemned, or higher to be overly adored.
- Ways that help level the playing field and by promoting justice and mercy for all, not just those like us.

We, like John the Baptist, are called to prepare the way...to show a passion for the things of God: like offering hope and being a fierce advocate for peace. To be passionate about something means you are willing to take risks for it...to maintain goal-oriented behaviors to achieve it. Those earthly leaders that Luke first show us are the Hanz and Franz's of the world – offering a toxic view of what power and strength look like...but when we look the other way...into the wilderness where God resides...we see that power and strength come from the Lord, and looks a lot more like love and humility, peace and truth, a joy for justice.

Advent calls us to the hope that we will all find passion to live such a life...an Emmanuel kind of life...where God is with us and it makes all the difference in the world, so that all of creation will be at peace.