



Prepare the Way for the Lord

Week 3: Listen, Learn, & Lead

Lori Lampert - 12/11/2022

Podcasts. I have come very late to the show. For many years Brian and many others have asked me, “Did you listen to the podcast?” of one show or another, and my answer was a quiet, “No.” I don’t listen to podcasts. I had put them in the category of one more thing. Maybe you know the feeling? When you just can’t do one more thing? I like the quiet. I don’t like being inundated with opinions on my drive.

I usually listen to the oldies, which at one time was the 60s and 70s and is now becoming the 90s and 2000s. But more and more people, like Brian, made suggestions to me, so about 6 months ago I got on board and began to listen to podcasts. It has become a whole new opportunity to listen and learn from people all around the world. I am hooked.

Last Thursday, December 1st, was World AIDS Day. The podcast RadioLab rebroadcast an episode called “Ashes on the Lawn.” The question they were exploring was *how do you make significant change in the world?* which I found intriguing. I mean, isn't that the reason we have decided to live as followers of Jesus Christ—to make significant changes in the world, to engage with the Holy Spirit and bring light to darkness? So I listened with that lens in place as they spoke about how AIDS activists in the 80s and 90s raised our global awareness of the great need to understand this pandemic and find treatments. Treatments that are now, in 2022, saving lives.

The episode was called "Ashes on the Lawn" because a group of a couple of hundred people marched one day in the late 80s and poured the cremated ashes of their loved ones on the lawn of the White House. An event I had never heard about. The podcast spoke of the AIDS quilt, which I did know about. When a display of it came to Springfield last year, through the efforts of the AIDS Project of the Ozarks, I was one of many who volunteered.

But what got me in the gut was a relationship that had developed between Dr. Anthony Fauci—yes that Dr. Fauci—and an angry AIDS activist. Dr. Fauci was working even then at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease in Washington, a place he will retire from at the end of this year. He received an email from a person who pretty much was yelling at him on the computer. Dr. Fauci was accused of all kinds of misconduct and misappropriation of research and funds. He was being attacked. Belittled. Demeaned. This activist, this person, attacked Dr. Fauci for what he felt was preventing progress and help in dealing with this crisis. He ultimately wrote that Dr. Fauci should be killed. Whew.

What would have been your response? Me? Erase the darn email. Cry a bit at the attack. Probably go home and sulk for a while. Probably call someone and process about the way I was being treated. I'm not sure that it would have occurred to me to do as Dr. Fauci did. He reached out to the activist. He said on the podcast he wanted to understand how a person could become as angry as this man had become.

Rather than ignore the words, he sought to intentionally learn and sought to understand what was beyond his experience—how dealing with AIDS had caused a level of pain that created this deep fear and hate. So Dr. Fauci contacted the activist, and what began as an email led to a conversation over drinks, led to regular meals together where others were invited to bring their experiences, which led to Dr. Fauci becoming laser focused on the research and treatment of AIDS. What would have caused me to walk away caused him to lean in.

By now I suspect you are wondering what on earth this has to do with Advent, the season of preparation for the birth of Jesus Christ we are in right now. The sanctuary is beautifully decorated, the music wonderfully accompanying our journey toward the arrival of the infant Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem. I love this time of the year.

Yet, in focusing on the baby we cannot lose sight of who is coming and why God is entering humanity in the incarnation. God is coming to save us. Jesus' very name means God Saves. A world in darkness needs light. A world suffering in oppression and fear, needs freedom and hope. A world lost, and pulling further and further from the love of God and love of neighbor desperately needs to know that there is a way forward where love wins.

We are looking at this earth-shaking event through the lens of the life of John the Baptist. The past two weeks we explored John's birth as proclaimed by the angel Gabriel to Zechariah and Elizabeth. We learned of the miracle of this old couple becoming parents to the one chosen by God to prepare the way of the Lord. We, too, are called to persist in prayer knowing God is with us even—well, especially—in our pain.

Last week we embraced the idea of the silence of Zechariah for nine months as an opportunity to understand the power of quiet, to listen and learn from the Holy Spirit. And Kris Keller challenged us to carve out time this Advent to be silent, to say no to some things so we can say yes to hearing the Holy Spirit speak to us.

Today, we are looking at what sounds very much like the adult John is now “yelling” on the pages of Luke chapter 3. I am using the Message version today. It would be much easier to skip this part in Advent. Who wants these words to come into our beautiful setting? But they are here. And let's listen to understand why. The Holy Spirit has been speaking through them down through the ages and will do so today.

Listen to these first verses:

¹⁻⁶ In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius—it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—John, Zachariah’s son, out in the desert at the time, received a message from God. He went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins, as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet:

Thunder in the desert! “Prepare God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight! Every ditch will be filled in, Every bump smoothed out, The detours straightened out, All the ruts paved over. Everyone will be there to see The parade of God’s salvation.”

The author of Luke sets the story of John and of Jesus firmly in the midst of history. Scholars date this time at 29 AD, as that is when Tiberius was in his 15th year as Emperor of Rome. And the story of John and Jesus is placed firmly in the time of the most powerful political and religious leaders of the age. Leaders who were corrupt and violent. Leaders who enslaved. Leaders who were known for bribery and robbery. And particularly leaders whose names would become prominent in the crucifixion of Jesus: Pilate, Herod, Annaias, Caiaphas.

Up against these people who hold so much power, comes John out of the wilderness. A single voice. One messenger raised to proclaim to all who will hear that there is a path for redemption and hope. That there is a way forward through the muck and mire of the world. And even as he speaks, the Messiah, Jesus is coming.

John is one person standing before people he believes are living unprepared lives. There are too many people dying. Too many causing harm. Too much

stealing. Too much corruption. And so John speaks these courageous words to the crowd around him. Is he yelling? It feels like he must be:

⁷⁻⁹ When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “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 deflect God’s judgment? It’s your *life* that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

It is your life that must change. Your *life*. Change your heart. Change your behavior. Not another day needs to go by before you prepare to meet the Lord. Not another moment of believing that your birthright guarantees your salvation so you are “good.” Not another day of acquiescing to the corruption around you, saying “that’s just the way things are.” No, your life matters and it was given to you to participate in restoring the world to be as God intended.

So John yells. Out of the desperate need to be heard. Out of a desire to do all he can to make a difference. Out of frustration at the roadblocks from those in power, from the lack of interest and participation to make the world ready to receive the gift of Jesus Christ.

And, miracle of miracles, John is heard that day. The crowd doesn't just walk away. The tax collectors don't just tune him out. The soldiers don't put him upside down in the Jordan river and end him there and then. Listen to what happens:

¹⁰ The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?” ¹¹ “If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with

your food.”¹² Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?”¹³ He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.”

¹⁴ Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?” He told them, “No harassment, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

The people around him are asking the same questions we ask. In the midst of so much evil, violence, and corruption. Inside systems that are set up to benefit those already in power, systems that we are a part of ourselves. In the middle of all of that, what are we supposed to do? And I wonder, were they afraid of what John would say? Although they knew that the culture around them was not just, was not righteous, was not the way to restore the world, did they really want an answer?

John gives them simple answers. Clear answers that speak to the heart of the matter. Compassion and economic changes. Start here. Begin here. Give out of your abundance. While others around you may choose to steal, may choose to extort. You are to stay within the bounds of honesty and integrity in your work. And while you might have the ability to harass and threaten in order to keep power, don't do it. You have weapons that can harm; don't use them in that way. You have corrupt authority behind you; stay incorruptible. You know things and see things that can be used to blackmail. Refuse to do so.

These are words that are not hard to understand, but challenge the status quo. They require something of the listener. They require people to open not only their ears but also their hearts and then their behavior.

I was so very struck by the way these simple instructions can and do result in significant changes in the world. I found them in that podcast on December 1. They are the same steps Dr. Fauci used decades ago to change his focus. He listened. He received what he learned. He changed his behaviour, and in

turn he made a significant impact on the lives of so, so many dealing with a deadly disease.

What can you do?

I am not going to call you a brood of vipers because I don't believe you are. I believe you are here today or watching us online because you want to be different from the world around you. You want to know more about following Jesus Christ, the baby born in Bethlehem, the Savior of the world. Perhaps you have already been asking this question, to help prepare you and this world for the second Advent, the coming of Christ once again. What can I do?

Then, as now, listen to this one voice crying in the wilderness. A single person who believed that he and you and everyone in the world is included in the story of repentance and forgiveness and salvation coming in Jesus Christ. A person who God uses mightily to begin a story that will only end at the close of the age, when Christ comes in final victory. A voice speaking to you and me through the centuries. Serve where you are. Take a stand against corruption and greed and for love of God and love of neighbor.

And do as John did, point people away from self and toward Jesus.

¹⁵ The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, "Could this John be the Messiah?"

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ But John intervened: "I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

¹⁸⁻²⁰ There was a lot more of this—words that gave strength to the people, words that put heart in them. The Message! But Herod, the ruler, stung by John’s rebuke in the matter of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, capped his long string of evil deeds with this outrage: He put John in jail.

This is the message that came, not to the emperors or the proconsul. It came to a simple man who walked out of the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord. And it is handed to you. What will you do to prepare the way for the Lord?