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PRESIDENT'S LETTER - DECEMBER 05

In the old days before lights and bells and crossing arms at railroad crossings, railroad crossings were lethal. The instructions were drilled into us that when we saw a railroad crossing sign, we were to stop, look, and listen.

This Advent season, God would have us stop, look and listen. We have God's own special messenger to guide us in these advent meditations. John the Baptist was sent so that God's people would stop, look, and listen. As pastors, we would do well to set aside some quiet time amidst the busyness of the season to listen to the Voice crying in the wilderness.

STOP! **Luke 3:1-18**

John the Baptist attracted attention by how different he was from the usual scribe or Pharisee or high priest. His field of activity was the desert. He was dressed as a hermit in rough clothing, and he subsisted on grasshoppers and honey. It was his message that caused people to "stop" in their tracks. Can you imagine going out on a Wednesday evening to hear a preacher and then hearing, "Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

John's message was "Stop being satisfied with the status quo! Stop being satisfied with your dead ritual and self-absorbed righteousness!" Already the ax was being laid to the dead tree of the nation of Israel. God was looking for fruits of repentance from His people. John's message was "Stop and repent of your sins!"

This Advent God would have us stop the material busyness of this season. He would have us stop the self-satisfied excess of celebration. He would have us stop running around so much and listen to His message of repentance and life. Stop being so concerned about getting everything done in your ministries and listen to the cry of the Voice in the wilderness. Stop and take time to prepare for the coming of Him who will gather the wheat into His barn, but the chaff He will burn with an unquenchable fire.

LOOK! **John 1:29-34**

It is not enough just to stop and bury your head in the sand during this overcharged season. God sent John the Baptist to identify the promised Messiah and Savior from sin. When the Christ appeared, John had to decrease so that the Savior would increase. John pointed out the One upon whom he had seen the Spirit descend like a dove. At Jesus' baptism, John saw the proof that this Jesus is the Son of God.

So it was natural for John to tell his disciples, "Look! Behold, the Lamb of God who carries away the sin of the world." John wanted his disciples and the people to see Jesus for who He was - the promised Messiah and Redeemer of the world. This Advent season our ministries are simply to point out to our people, "Look! This baby is the Son of God and the promised Messiah." We would be remiss if we did not also testify that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who died for the sins of the world.

John used the Old Testament shadow pictures of the sacrifices to focus the spotlight on Jesus and what He would do. Look! Jesus is that Lamb who would be sacrificed at the altar of God's justice to atone for the sins of every person. This once-and-for-all sacrifice would bring the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' blood. Look! Jesus was the scapegoat, who got blamed for all the sins Israel had committed during the year, and who was banished to the desert bearing the sins of the people. God placed all of our sins on the innocent Jesus. Jesus became the scapegoat so that we might be found blameless by God.

Look this Advent and Christmas season and show your people the Lamb of God who bears away the sins of the world.

LISTEN!
Matthew 11:11-15

How often will you have to remind your children this Christmas season, "Listen to me!" How often doesn't God have to get our attention and tell us, "Listen to Me!" The people of Israel would not listen to the messengers of the Lord. They would not listen to John the Baptist. In this chapter, Jesus marveled that so few had heeded the voice of John the Baptist. John did not tell the people what they wanted to hear. John did not tell them that everything was all right. John called the people to repentance and pointed them to a Savior who would die at the cross for them.

Jesus said of John, "He who has ears, let him hear." This Christmas listen to one, small, still voice as God calls to you in the Gospel. Pray that your people will be given ears to hear that they rejoice in the Good News of the Christmas Gospel. If you listen, you will hear the love of God revealed for you personally in Jesus. If you listen, you will hear how God has delivered you from your sins and freed you from death.

Some people still find excuses not to listen to God's Word in the Scriptures as proclaimed by faithful messengers. Some people are too preoccupied to really listen to your sermons and counseling. This Christmas Eve in many of our churches, our children will proclaim the Gospel of God's gift of His Son. Don't just think of this as a production, but listen to the familiar message of God's love. Rejoice that your people listen to the Word of God in spite of your weaknesses and your failings. Listen and rejoice with the angels this Christmas. Listen and ponder all these things in your hearts.

A Blessed Christmas to you and your families (especially to the Christian wives God has given you).

John Schierenbeck