

**ADVENT 2C – 12/9/18**  
***The Messenger***  
**(Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 1:68-79, Luke 3:1-6)**

There have been a number of famous *messengers* in recorded history. One of the earliest was a long-distance runner named Pheidippides who, following the Greek victory over the Persians in the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., was dispatched to carry the news of that victory back to Athens. According to legend, Pheidippides ran the 25 miles at a very fast pace. So much so, that upon reaching Athens with news of their victory, he is said to have cried out, “We won!” before collapsing and dying on the spot.

Unfortunately, as it turns out, the legend is not really accurate. Now, to be sure, there actually *was* a runner named Pheidippides but, instead of running from Marathon to Athens *after* the battle, he apparently ran instead from Athens to Sparta *before* the battle in order to ask for their assistance. And after the battle, it was actually the victorious army *itself* that double-timed it back to Athens in order to head-off the defeated Persians in case they tried to sail around the peninsula and now attack Athens directly from the sea.

Later in popular imagination, however, the two events were somehow conflated resulting in a legendary but inaccurate version of events. Needless to say, therefore, neither did Pheidippides ever cry out “We won!” before dropping dead of exhaustion either.

Nevertheless, over two thousand years later, in 1896, at the first modern Olympic Games *held* in Athens the organizers were looking for a special new event to recall the ancient glory of Greece. So, remembering the legendary story of Pheidippides and the Battle of Marathon, they came up with a distance race which they aptly *called* the Marathon. And the rest, of course, is history. Even though, as I say, the history is flawed.

There's a great line from a classic western movie called *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. When a newspaper reporter learns the truth that Jimmy Stewart's character *did not* actually shoot and kill the famous outlaw, and Stewart asks him if now he's going to print the "true" version of events, the reporter replies, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Well, in the case of Pheidippides and the Battle of Marathon the very same thing is true. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend...

There is another legendary story about a messenger as well. One that is much closer to home and recognizable to each and every school-child. Immortalized in the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, it's the story of the so-called "midnight ride" of Paul Revere.

*Listen my children and you shall hear  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.  
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;  
Hardly a man is now alive  
Who remembers that famous day and year.*

As we were all taught, according to Longfellow's version of the events at least, Paul Revere rode all by himself from Boston to Lexington and Concord to warn the American patriots that the British troops were on the move, headed in their direction. And the message that he shouted at each house and hamlet along the way, of course, was "The British are coming! The British are coming!"

Only that's not really true. Contrary to popular belief, Revere never actually shouted "The British are coming!" at all. Instead his mission depended on absolute secrecy and the countryside was filled with British army patrols. Moreover, most of the Massachusetts colonists at that time were predominantly of English origin and therefore still considered themselves to *be* British.

Not only that, but Paul Revere was not even the *only* messenger sent out to warn everyone! As a matter of fact, there were actually *five* riders altogether. Paul Revere rode that night with two others: William Dawes and Samuel Prescott. On the way from Lexington to Concord, however, Dawes's horse threw him off and ran away. While Revere, for his part, was captured by the British, leaving only Prescott to make it all the way to Concord.

*Not only that*, but there was also a female rider as well named Sybil Ludington who was only 16 years old at the time. And, even though she made her ride a week later, she was able to warn the colonists of Danbury, Connecticut of the British approach in much the same way as those three men had. And actually rode twice *as far* as Paul Revere did, as well...

Finally, there was Israel Bissell. Bissell was ordered to raise the alarm down in New Haven, Connecticut. Beginning his journey in Watertown, Massachusetts on April 19, 1775, Bissell reached Worcester, Mass., normally a day's ride, in just two hours. There his horse promptly dropped dead. Pausing only to get another mount, Bissell pressed on, and by April 22 had reached New Haven. But he didn't stop there! He rode on to New York, arriving on April 24, and then stayed in the saddle until he reached Philadelphia the next day. And so Bissell's 126 hour, 345 mile ride signaled American militia units throughout the *entire* Northeast to mobilize for war. And, unlike the more well-known Paul Revere, Bissell apparently did shout *his* message along the way, "To arms, to arms, the war has begun!" he said.

Of course, Bissell did not have the benefit of a poet like Longfellow to immortalize *his* deeds, however. Although the historian, Clay Perry, in the style of Longfellow, later wrote this:

*Listen my children, to my epistle  
Of the long, long ride of Israel Bissell.  
Who outrode Paul by miles and time*

*But didn't rate a poet's rhyme.*

Or as comedian Robert Wuhl once suggested, the reason why Israel Bissell is not as famous as Paul Revere is the simple fact that his name – Israel Bissell – sounds like a Jewish vacuum cleaner!

So Paul Revere is the one we remember. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend...

Well, today's gospel is *also* about a messenger, isn't it? But is it legend? Or is it fact?

Consider this: Luke takes great pains, and goes to great lengths, in order to anchor *his* story of a messenger smack dab in the history of that time. As we heard, he begins "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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

Did you catch that? Two verses, sixty-one words in total. Seven people, and four regions specifically named. All to introduce this messenger from God named John. And *especially* to anchor John and locate his story in a particular, and identifiable, time and place in history. In other words, this is no mere legend or unsubstantiated tradition. This is a person who really lived, and who really did what he did and said what he said.

You see, today's Gospel, again, is all about a *messenger*; a messenger in this case announcing the coming of Christ into the troubled and sinful world in which we live and from which there seems to be no escape for us – at least none that we can find. A messenger to speak a word of warning as well; a message about readiness and preparedness.

And that messenger, as we heard, is a man named John, the so-called “forerunner” and a cousin of Jesus, in fact. A man sent ahead to announce Jesus’ arrival and to help people prepare for his coming...

This John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, Luke tells us. His message wasn’t “We won!” like the legendary Pheidippides. Nor was it “The British are coming! The British are coming!” as attributed by legend to Paul Revere. Nor even the “To arms, to arms, the war has begun,” of Israel Bissell. Instead, John’s message was all about changed minds and changed hearts and changed lives.

That’s because Luke tells us that John went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The Greek word *metanoia* literally means “to change one’s mind.” Someone once said it’s like making a “U-turn.” You set out in one direction and then change your mind, turn around, and head back where you came from.

But the really interesting thing here is that *metanoia* was actually a military command; the equivalent of the modern-day “About face!” It meant to “turn around and face the opposite direction.”

And whether you think about repentance as making a “U-turn” or responding to a command of “About face!” what we’re turning *to*, or rather *who* we’re turning to... is God. Repentance, then, is all about turning *away* from those things that separate us from God, and turning *back* to those things that draw us closer to God.

And so it’s also true that repentance is much more – so much more – than just acknowledging and being remorseful for the things we’ve done wrong. It’s more than simply making an apology or saying “I’m sorry.”

For years, the Peanuts comic strip written by Charles Schulz had a long-running and recurring storyline depicting Charlie Brown and Lucy

practicing football. Lucy would hold the ball for Charlie's place-kicking and Charlie would go running up to kick the ball. And every time that Lucy held the ball for Charlie Brown, he would approach the ball preparing to kick it with all his might. But at the precise moment when Charlie's foot was just about to strike the ball, Lucy would suddenly yank the ball away. And Charlie would kick into the air, and his forward momentum unchecked by the ball – which was no longer there – would cause him to fall flat on his back. This happened every time in the comic strip, every single time, for *years*.

Well, in this one particular comic strip, Lucy was once again holding the ball. But this time Charlie Brown was having none of it; he was refusing to kick it. “Every time I try to kick the ball, you pull it away, and I fall on my back,” he said.

They argued about this for a long time, and finally Lucy broke down in tears and admitted. “Charlie Brown, I've been so terrible to you over the years, picking up the ball like I have. I've played so many cruel tricks on you, but I've seen the error of my ways! I've seen the hurt look in your eyes when I've deceived you. I've been wrong, so wrong. Won't you please give a poor penitent girl another chance?”

And Charlie Brown was so moved by her display of remorse that he said to her, “Of course, Lucy. I'll give you another chance.”

So he stepped back as she held the ball and he ran up to it. But at the last minute, Lucy picked up the ball and Charlie Brown once again fell flat on his back.

And Lucy's last words were, “Recognizing your faults and actually changing your ways are two different things, Charlie Brown!”

But recognizing your faults and actually changing your ways are *not* two different things, at least not according to John the Baptist. What he was

advocating here was a radical “about face” from sin, and a quick “U-turn” on the highway of life.

For John, it was all about getting your life in order in preparation for the coming of the Lord. About getting yourself ready to meet the Christ. About abandoning the sinful behaviors which draw us away *from* God, and embracing instead the kinds of actions and deeds which draw us back *to* him...

A rabbi was once walking along with some of his students when one of them asked, “Rabbi, when should a man repent?” The rabbi replied, “You should repent on the last day of your life.” The student went on, “But we can never be sure which day will *be* our last!” To which the rabbi smiled and replied, “Then the answer is simple. Repent *now!*”

Repent *now*, said John. Don’t dawdle or delay. Repent now. Change now. And in doing so make the way ready for the coming of Christ.

The choice is always ours to make. And the choice we make can then make all the difference in our lives...

As many of you know, I’ve been taking a course at the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania campus of United Lutheran Seminary leading to a certificate in Congregational Faith Formation. Once a month, since September, I’ve been driving over to Gettysburg on a Thursday afternoon and then spending Friday and Saturday in class before returning on Saturday night.

And being that it *is* Gettysburg, the site of arguably the most famous and bloody battle of the American Civil War, and since I drive through the town to the seminary campus which was already there back when the battle was being fought, I’ve been reading a little bit about what took place in Gettysburg during early July of 1863. Robert E. Lee, the Confederate general, commanding the army of Northern Virginia, who had yet to be beaten on the battlefield by the Union army, had decided to

invade the north to break their morale and possibly, if unchecked, to even wheel and turn east to attack and perhaps take Washington D.C. itself. If he was successful, it was possible that the South might even win the war.

As it turned out, the two armies met almost by accident in the little town of Gettysburg. Caught off guard and completely by surprise, the Union troops did not fare very well that first day of battle. Towards evening, General Lee sent a messenger to one of his commanders in the field, a General Ewell, with an important but controversial message that is debated to this very day.

The message was an order to take a certain, relatively unoccupied, hill – if it seemed reasonable. “Practicable” was the word Lee used. “Take the hill, if practicable.”

What followed was, according to some, one of the greatest military blunders in history, and most likely the entire Civil War. Rather than advancing to take the hill, as ordered, Ewell hesitated; largely because of that phrase “if practicable.” It was an ambiguous order at best. Moreover it left the decision of what to do up to General Ewell himself.

Well, in the end, Ewell finally decided that it *wasn't* practicable. And instead of taking the strategic high ground which might have turned the entire battle, indeed the entire *war*, in their favor, the Confederates did not, the Union troops in turn regrouped, fortified the high ground themselves, and ultimately won the battle and, with it, the war as well. All because of a message that wasn't acted upon, and a messenger who was ignored...

Luke describes a very dramatic and critical scene for us in today's gospel reading. The messenger, John the Baptist, is a voice crying out in the wilderness calling upon God's people to repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord. To take a U-turn in their lives. To hear a command

of “About face!” and to change their hearts and minds, and their entire lives. A message that, unlike Lee’s, was not at all ambiguous.

And it’s no different for us today. The voice of John is still crying out in the wilderness; calling unambiguously for us to repent, to change our lives, and in so doing, to make ready for the coming of Christ.

And the burning question for us this morning is simply this: Will *this* messenger and *his* message be ignored?

Amen.