



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way."

I speak as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Over the past week or so, as I've been meditating on this passage from the Gospel of Mark, I had a bit of a revelation. I have studied religion in one form or another for the past 28 years, and I have a PhD in religious studies. So when I say revelation or epiphany, I mean something kind of profound, at least to me.

And that is that Christianity is a message-based religion. It's somewhat unique when you look at all of the religions in the world in being a message-based religion. Because message-based religions mean that the point of that religion is not that you would have a ritual that holds things in place. It's not that you have a sacred text that you can master and thereby have power. It's not that you have any kind of affiliation with an organization through the sacraments that make you who you are. A message-based religion depends upon you receiving and being transformed by that message. It comes from a source that will never be exhausted in any kind of revelation. It will always have more to teach you, and you have to humble yourself to receive that message and that messenger so that you might be saved.

In this, Christianity is like Judaism, its parent religion, because Judaism pivots around the words of the prophets and the God who acts and calls and delivers a message to God's servant, Moses. It's like Islam, which is all based upon a messenger, the Prophet Muhammad. But for Christianity, that message is the gospel. It is the message of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, man divine, who has come into our midst so that we would know God and know each other in God and be transformed by that message, that word made flesh. Jesus is both the message and messenger, and John points the way to Jesus when he has his own role as a messenger.

Now all of this is key for us to attend to because we are living in a time and place in which messages are mixed and messages are misguided. One of the features of contemporary life, and this started with the advent of television, is that we have had a different kind of way in which we understand messages. Marshall McLuhan, the great theorist of communication who was based in the University of Toronto, coined a phrase in a groundbreaking book that characterizes what it

is like today to live among the messages we do. He called it the medium is the message.

And the reason why he said that is because he was speaking at the dawn of the television age and he realized that there was something profound that was happening in our culture, which is that before if you wanted to learn something, you had to read about it. And when you had that linear communication, you would then imagine in your mind what was being described on the page. But with television, you had what he called configuration. You could see what was happening and the distance between you and whatever was happening began to close. You didn't have time to interpret it, you only had the opportunity to be somehow sucked in to the power of that medium.

And television became not only a way to convey communicative content, but television itself became the medium that is the message. Because the way television figured out how to make money was through advertising airtime on its airwaves. And so the point of television was to keep you captivated and never walking away because that was how they made money. And McLuhan saw this as a major shift in how human beings understood what was good, what was true, and what was beautiful.

And that beginning point of the medium and the message coming together has only become more pervasive and contemporary life. McLuhan could never imagine that TV screens would become so small as to fit into our hands. And he could probably never imagine that you and I would be so captive to our cell phones. And there, again, the same logic applies. The job is to keep you captive, to keep you from looking up and seeing what's going around you, and being an actor in the world around you. It's meant to remove any obstacle between you and that medium, which is the message.

All of advertising is created not merely to sell a physical product, but to eliminate and sell an experience that you somehow hold onto and that becomes your reality. And it's based upon promises that are powerful, that tell us that if we could actually purchase what that small screen is telling us to do, we would be happy, finally. And of course we blame our lives by saying, my God, it's so horrible, I just go on Amazon and we get something. But in fact, that turning to that medium that is the message is part of the point because the point of any good advertising is to instill in you discomfort and dissatisfaction with where you are presently. And so therefore, you continue to buy all at the touch of a button with the cell phone before you.

So the problem of contemporary life is we have mixed and misleading and misguided messages as part of our daily reality. And this makes it difficult for us to determine the message of Christianity and the medium of Jesus Christ from all the other messages out there. And one of the ways that it is different, and one

of the things that we're invited to do in Advent is actually to determine which messages are going to be primary in our lives. The message that comes through your cell phone is meant to isolate you. It's meant to hold you captive. It's meant to somehow keep you as a single person and not as part of a larger community, because the more it can occupy your time, the more you can act in its behalf and under its guidance.

But Christianity is built around bringing your connection to each other in a more powerful way. Christianity does not make you captive, it's meant to liberate you. The message of Christ is to liberate you, not to hold you captive. And Christianity is not designed so that you stay isolated in some kind of little community that is separated from other people. Rather, Christianity is to create a connection with others so that you might be transformed by being in relationship. And Christianity, the message of Christianity, the medium of Jesus Christ, who is the message of Christianity, this is all construed and created so that we could actually create the conditions for a deeper relationship. Not that we would experience something where we were isolated, but that we were transformed by being put in touch with God.

So Advent is a time for us to think about the messages before us. It would be nice if I could tell you all to put down your cell phones for a bit. And I know how fruitless that is because I have a cell phone. And I know that probably one or two of you have already sent a text message during the sermon because that is the nature of what it means to be a human being. When I complain about all this messaging that happens around us, it's a little bit like the fish complaining about the water. But Christianity does have a way of holding things true, and that's by developing a kind of discipleship in which we place Jesus at the forefront of our lives.

And that's the purpose of Advent. It's to place God in Christ first and to recognize that that message is liberating, that that message is life-giving. That that message creates a connection, that that message opens your mind so that you can see things differently. And that message is always with a price, whether it's paid by Christ primarily on the Cross, or whether it's experienced in your own transformation, and those little deaths that we all have to do to ourself and to others so that we might be reborn in Christ.

In every moment of Christian messaging, there's always a call, in other words, to repentance, to change, to transformation, to turning back to God. And this is a grace and that grace is sometimes missed. In our reading today from Mark, when everybody flocked to see John the Baptist in our reading today, it was not because he was an immense social influencer with an incredible social media site. It was because the people of God and the people of Israel believed at that point that they had fallen so far away from God that there was never any

message that could be delivered again. And the opportunity to repent was such good news that they flocked to John to be baptized and made right with God again.

So it is with Christianity. The message that we receive goes deeper than any message on our cell phone. And one of the ways we do that is through prayer, through worship, through engaging in Christian discipleship and giving, through being in community with each other during this time.

I have two pieces of art I'm going to share with you today. One is from Bill Viola. It's on your bulletin and this is a powerful image. It's called *The Messenger*, and it was done initially at a church. And Viola has this actor lying in a pool of water and then slowly he films the actor as he gets submerged and comes back up for air and goes back down and comes back up. And it's meant to convey how messages work when they're truly transformative. The message of the gospel invites you to go deeper and to come back up. The message of the gospel invites deep change in a powerful way.

And so one of the things to maybe help you focus the application of what I'm trying to invite you to do today is to think about that deep change that God is inviting you to partake in. What I love about this art piece is it has that kind of instability that all art has, that equivocation, because you don't know whether the message is to submerge or if the message comes when you finally break the service and you can breathe again. Where is God calling you today with regards to that message? That message of Christ coming to you?

The second piece of art is a poem I wrote. About three years ago, I began to do some deep work, spiritually. And part of the assignment that I had been given was I was supposed to read the scriptures and then try to imagine myself there, like what color was Mary's dress kind of thing. And I said, you know, I just can't do that. And I just know too much. I've studied the Bible. I know that there's no way we know what Mary was wearing, just the way it is. I just know too much. And so the director who is smart said, well, what can you do to engage these stories? And I decided to try to write poetry. It's embarrassing to admit, but it's terrifying for me to do, to try to say something beautifully in a poetic way.

And I was assigned to look at the message that the Angel Gabriel gives to Mary that she is to bear Christ. And I began to pray through this to try to think about what it was like to receive that message for the first time. Mary is an archetype for us as Christians because Mary is the first Christian. She's the one who bears Christ inside of her, just as you and I are supposed to bear Christ inside of us. And so this is what I wrote:

It is not for me to judge the news I must deliver
I can only trust the promise hidden is greater than what you could ask or imagine

You will bear the fullness of the word
God already made you able to receive what I speak
Do not be afraid is poor advice to anyone dismayed or distraught
Trust the promise of God's presence hidden in these words
Trust the grace shining from your body like the sun
For as I made my way through brokenness to find you,
I followed the light shining from you as much as the light sending me

And this I leave you as a way to sharpen what I want you to think about today.
Because one of the main differences between the misguided and mixed
messages we receive is that the message of Christianity is meant to convey upon
you the dignity of being a child of God, and having Christ born inside you.

It's not meant to exploit you and take something from you or keep you
dissatisfied. It's meant to bring you home and include you and invite you to be
enveloped in God's own infinite love. Hear that message today. Let it sink into
your soul, be transformed by what you hear and see this Advent and Christmas.

Amen.