Sermon "The Unexpected Symphony"
Kirk of St James
December 7th, 2025
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N.T Wright once said, "imagine that we are going to a huge concert hall, packed to the doors with eager and excited music lovers. We all have our programmes in hand, waiting for the thunderous music to begin. We know what it ought to sound like. This will be music for a battle, for a victory, thunder and lightning and explosions of wonderful noise. The concert manager comes on stage and declares in ringing tones that the famous musician has arrived. He gets us all on our feet, to welcome with an ovation the man who is going to fulfill all our expectations.

As we stand there eagerly, a small figure comes on the stage. He doesn't look at all like what we expected. He is carrying, not a conductor's baton, to bring the orchestra to life, but a small flute. As we watch, shocked into silence, he plays, gently and softly, a tune quite different to what we had imagined. But, as we listen, we start to hear familiar themes played in a new way. The music is haunting and fragile, winging its way into our imaginations and hopes and transforming them. And, as it reaches its close, as though at a signal, the orchestra responds with a new version of the music we had been expecting all along."

That is how N.T Wright views the passage in Matthew this morning, as the unexpected John the Baptist begins preparing the way for the one the prophet Isaiah foretold. While the season of advent begins the new church year, advent is also a time of transition. We celebrate the coming Christ child, and at the same time look forward to when he will come again. The season of advent is a time in the Christian year where we intentionally carve out time to remember the promises of God. We give thanks for what has been and for all that is still to come.

An interesting piece of information came to light while I was reading for this week, and it described how unusual it would have been for people to travel to the wilderness. Often when

things needed to happen in the ancient world people travelled to the city centres, where temples and power were amassed. They did not travel out into the middle of nowhere to hear a fringe prophet— "the margins came to the centre not the reverse." Word of what John was doing was spreading and people wanted to be part of what John was promising. In fact, there were so many people talking about it that the Pharisees and the Sadducees had to see for themselves what everyone was talking about.

John was not a prophet like Isaiah, instead he existed on the fringes, living a simple ascetic life. He was not standing in a grand temple; he had nothing to recommend himself outside of the message that he preached and the baptism that he practised. "It is difficult for us to realize what a challenge his prophetic witness was to the authorities who came from the centre, Jerusalem, and the temple in Judea. John was baptizing those who were confessing their sins, a redemptive activity usually reserved for the temple and the sacrificial system controlled by the high priests and the religious caste." While on the outside one might assume John should have extraordinarily little actual power or be a threat the opposite was actually true. John was a major threat to the entire system.

We might wonder what John would have to say to us today on this second Sunday of advent, and I have two suggestions. The first is that while the season of advent is about the coming birth of the Christ child it is also about repentance—something we typically talk about more during the season of lent. During lent the ashes and long road to the cross feel like an appropriate time to take stock of our lives and how they align with God. However, advent is also a season when we think about what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God, one that started in humility and grew in love.

How do our words, our actions, and lives line up with what the Christ child came to show us about the kingdom? As one writer said, "Because John, and the Jesus he announces, arrive with the most astonishing combination of acceptance and admonition. We all discover this Advent, not only are we cherished for who we are, but that we are responsible for what we do…if God loves me enough to welcome me into Christ's family, then God loves me enough to expect something of me." And during the Christmas season it is easy for our to-do lists and anxieties to become the focus and the true meaning of the season to get lost in the noise. I will be the first to put my hand up and say I have worried far more about how busy I am, and what I have left to do than about anything to do with the birth of Christ. We all need John the Baptist in our lives calling us to remember the things that are important.

There is a lawyer in the states who talks a lot about families and the issues that are facing them. And he did a video this week talking about letters to Santa. He said while there are a lot of letters asking for the new latest toy, or trend there is a heart-breaking amount that ask for other things—like food, a bed, for warm clothes, or for a family member or loved one who has passed away. The reality of that is heartbreaking.

The commercial part of Christmas would have us believe that the most important parts of the season are about the wrapped gifts, the perfectly shaped tree, and all the activities that we throw ourselves into. However, that is not what the Christ child came for. If we were peel back the thin veneer of Christmas lights and activities, we catch a glimpse of the world Christ came to save. Those he came to love, those who needed hope. That where we are called to work. We are called to be the hands of Christ at work in the world.

Which leads to the second thing I wanted to mention this morning. Sometimes here in our own pews we are the ones that feel like we are sitting in the wilderness. That over the past year

or perhaps longer we have found ourselves feeling lost or facing obstacles and situations that break our hearts or cause us major stress and anxiety. It is difficult to feel or even see the hope in the advent season when we are feeling like we are under unbearable pressure. The wilderness is an impossibly difficult place to find ourselves, and when we feel removed from the joy of the Christmas season it can feel even worse. Once again, we are reminded that it is here in the wilderness that Jesus can find us. We do not need to push ourselves into false feelings of happiness, instead we can simply sit where we are knowing that Christ sits with us. Jesus spent a generous amount of his earthly life in the wilderness as well.

That really is the gift of Christmas, that Jesus arrived in a manger surrounded by those society would often look down on. A saviour anyone can meet, a manger where there is always room. Not behind gates and guards, not surrounded by an army, simply a child who would grow up and show the world what love, and the kingdom of God can look like. We all have a role to play in that kingdom. This Christmas season may we meet people where they are in the lives, wilderness or otherwise, and invite them to come sit with us for a while by the manger and share the deep unending love of God.