

This week is Hanukkah. Some history:

Alexander the Great:

- late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC
- recognized for spreading Greek culture, language, and thought from Greece throughout Asia Minor, Egypt, and Mesopotamia, all the way to India – though by the time he reached India, his soldiers revolted and they all finally went home without conquering India
- never forced Greek culture on any of the people he conquered, but instead simply introduced Greek culture
- initiated what we call the Hellenistic Period (which lasted nearly three hundred years).

150 years after Alexander's death

Antiochus IV ruled Syria

Set out to seize Judaea (Judah) – what we would call Israel – including ridding the world of their religion. He wanted to create one religion for everyone.

- forbade the observance of the sabbath and traditional feasts
- called an end to all sacrifices
- forbade the reading of the Law of Moses and any and all copies were to be burned
- forbade circumcision
- 168 BC he invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, desecralizing the Holy of Holies
- later that same year (168), once again entered Jerusalem, plundering, burning, and setting up his own citadel overlooking the temple courts
- Dec. 25, 167 BC he dedicated the temple to Zeus.
- A resistance movement rose up around a priest named Mattathias 17 miles northwest of Jerusalem
- After Mattathias' death, his 3<sup>rd</sup> son, Judas Maccabeus, became the leader of the resistance

- December 164 bc, Judas recaptured Jerusalem, and reclaimed and reconsecrated the temple – launched a new era of semi-independence for Israel
- It was during this event that the Hanukkah (which means *rededication*) miracle occurred.
  - only enough untainted oil to keep the menorah's candles burning for a single day, they continued to burn for 8 days/nights, leaving enough time to get new, consecrated oil.
  - Hanukkah is being celebrated right now through to Friday of this week.

Imagine going to church (synagogue or the temple) in these years after they'd recaptured Jerusalem, and hearing Isaiah 61 read out loud:

<sup>1</sup>The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
 because the Lord has anointed me;  
 He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
 to bind up the broken-hearted,  
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
 and release to the prisoners;

<sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour  
 and the day of vengeance of our God;  
 to comfort all who mourn;

<sup>3</sup>to provide for those who mourn in Zion [a.k.a. Jerusalem] –  
 to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
 the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
 the planting of the Lord, to display His glory.

<sup>4</sup>They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
 they shall raise up the former devastations;  
 they shall repair the ruined cities,  
 the devastations of many generations.

Can you imagine those words to the ears of those who had fought side-by-side with Judas Maccabeus? It must have felt like the dawning of a new age – an age of hope, an age of God’s promises fulfilled. But over the years, as Judas’ descendants and those of his contemporaries who’d fought by his side, faded into memory – as Israel once again experienced relative calm and comfort in its place in the world – the hope grew stale and the living, breathing faith of men and women dedicated to the ways of God shrank to the less inspiring maintenance of religion.

150+ years later, the hopes and dreams of a restored kingdom of Israel had long been lost amidst the reality of the rise and fall of empires and emperors with vast lands and unstoppable armies. Isaiah’s words of hope were once again understood as a future hope. The people once again awaited the fulfillment of the promise. It was into that climate – that world of waiting – that reality of stale religion – that John the baptizer appeared by the Jordan.

He was a sight to behold! Dressed in camel’s hair and leather – no soft Roman cloth for this man – he bellowed in the desert at anyone and everyone who could hear. John’s gospel doesn’t tell us what he bellowed (or even *that* he bellowed; that’s just how I imagine it); we get that from Luke’s gospel. In Luke 3:7 – 9 we read this:

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

It seems that John’s listeners were primed and waiting for someone like John. Instead of getting offended at his words (like I imagine we might), they asked, “What should we do?”

In Mark’s gospel, in 1:4, John’s preaching is summarized simply as “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” In Luke 3, we read some specific examples of what this repentance looks like. We read in vv. 10 - 14:

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors [who were the worst of the worst] came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what

should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.”

This is the repentance John was preaching. He wasn't just standing out there by the Jordan saying to everyone, “Look, we've strayed somewhat from God's ways. And I'm a really charismatic, striking figure and my words are pretty convincing. So I'm going to pray while we sing a hymn and if you're moved, perhaps come on down and let me baptise you.”

In John's call to be baptized there was a demand for repentance; there was a demand for an acknowledgement that they hadn't been living up to God's ways; there was a demand for a new way of living – a way of living that lined up with the ancient Law passed down to them by Moses.

There was an urgency about John. His message seemed to promise some kind of imminent something. I imagine the words of Isaiah – words that people heard all the time in the temple and in their local synagogues – I imagine these words took on new life as they watched and listened to John in the desert.

It makes sense to me that they'd see in him the famed prophet Elijah or even the long-awaited Messiah. I wonder if he stirred up memories of the Maccabees. I'm sure he inspired visions of a new golden age – an age like that described by Isaiah.

It was into this expectation that Jesus began His ministry – His mission as the light of the world shining in the dark.

Can you imagine what it was like for those who witnessed His miracles? In their minds ring Isaiah's words and John's proclamation. They see and hear of the blind given sight, the lame healed, the lepers cleansed, the dead raised. How could they not have been filled with hope and expectation?

But then, as with the years after the heroic Maccabees, the years after Jesus' death once again leave God's people wondering and questioning. But here's the difference: Jesus wasn't done. His death didn't mark the end. When He rose from the dead the entire world was fundamentally changed. Things did not go back to the stale, old ways of religion as usual. There was a new movement – a new excitement, a new conviction, a new commitment...

And even though in the 2,000 years since this extraordinary God-with-us event there have certainly been times and places where this living, breathing faith inspired and sustained by God's own Holy Spirit, has been reduced to religion

managed by institutions, the world has never been able to shut down the hope of Jesus. As bad as the world seems, as hard as things are or have been at this or at any time over the last 2000 years, Jesus' birth – the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth – has never been and can never be canceled out.

Advent invites us to lament the realities of the world in which we live – realities marked by human sin and life lived in shadow – but it also reminds us that in Jesus, what came into the world was life, and that life was the light of all people. And that light continues to shine in the darkness – in the shadows – and the darkness did not, will not, and cannot overcome it (Jn. 1:3 – 5).

This is the promise of Advent, the promise of Jesus (from Isaiah 61:11):

“For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all nations.”