

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

## LET ME INTRODUCE YOU

Luke 3: 1 – 6

Pilgrim Bud Precise

All four Gospels (Those first four books of the New Testament proclaiming the Good News of God) begin with this introduction of Jesus by John the Baptizer. John is not the long awaited Messiah. He is simply the one who is to announce the Advent of God coming into the world in the form of a human being. We call it the Incarnation – God dwelling in human form. We have witnessed God dwelling in human form in other people, but no to the extent we see God’s love and purpose in the life of Jesus. We use the word Immanuel meaning God with us.

Have you ever had to introduce someone who was famous, important? God knows all of us have had to listen to introductions that caused us to just want to get up and leave the room. The introduction is a difficult and should be probably no more than two minutes. This introduction is to warm the audience, to get the audience excited about the speaker. You make the introduction and sit down quickly. It is a little like the warm up band for a more famous attraction. I remember being at City Stages. I wanted to hear James Brown – in person. I didn’t ever learn what it was that held up James Brown. But the warm up band went on – well, I left after an hour. I didn’t care about James Brown anymore. The most famous introduction I remember is from the Tonight Show. Ed McMahon would introduce Johnny Carson every night with “Heeeeere’s Johnny!”

I don’t believe that John the Baptizer took introductions 101. Instead of warming up the audience, he offended – probably most of them. In Gospels of Matthew and Luke, he called the audience a brood of snakes. In John’s Gospel when the audience asked John who he was he answered with words from the prophet Isaiah – “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness. Make straight the way for the Lord. Mark says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit. All of them pretty much have John saying, “You better get yourself washed up. Repent of your way of living. I am not the Messiah. I can’t even untie his shoe laces. You’d better get down here, be baptized and get ready because he is going to separate the good wheat from the chaff. He will refine and purify your life.” I can just imagine Joel Osteen saying that to his audience. The good respectable people listening to him would head for the exits.

We listen to this introduction and say, “Really now John. Maybe we don’t want to hear this speaker.”

At a preaching workshop, the leader said, “People don’t come to church to be judged, criticized and be made to feel uncomfortable. They want to be patted on the head and hear words ‘You are doing fine. God loves you the way you are.’” I certainly believe that God loves

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

us the way we are. But I also believe that there are times when God would like for us to begin to grow in our relationships and in discipleship. A television preacher says, "You are good. You mean well. You want to have a happy life – it is just that people drag you down." Then he advises, "Look in the mirror each morning and say, 'I will have a good day. I do believe in me.'" The preacher didn't even mention God in his sermon, but 14,000 people listened to his speech gladly.

A recent book on preaching advises preachers that if we want to people to listen to Jesus we need to tell them that Jesus can be USEFUL. You need peace in your life – here's Jesus. You need help getting out of bed in the morning – here's Jesus.

Enter John, the one to introduce Jesus. "You'd better get your dirty self cleaned up, get yourself baptized." Who listens to that?

I know who listens to John. There are those who know this is a message they need to hear. In our better moments, we recognize that our world is out of kilter. We know John is telling us the truth. But more than that, John told the audience that they could change. We do get content with the way we are. Routine makes everything seem familiar. So we don't take on much responsibility for the state of the world. We don't get troubled about Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Middle East. We don't think of global warming as a high priority. The education of our young people in the Birmingham City and Jefferson County School systems, well, it's bad, but we don't really put a priority on helping those schools and keeping those students in school. John speaks to the complacent. Maybe we don't want to hear that message. But I hope there is someone in this world who is just dying to hear John preach. Someone who is wise enough to know we need to change. Someone who is faithful enough to want a refining fire. Someone with courage enough to separate the good wheat from the trash. Someone ready to chop down an old tree so new - life giving branches can sprout. John was saying all this stuff to introduce Jesus.

Well, folks, here we are in Advent. And the word for today is from a familiar source. It is John, the voice crying in the wilderness. He is saying there is one coming who will call on you to look at the world in a different way. He will ask you to turn your life around. He is going to overthrow the money changers in the temple and challenge the middle of the road religion. He is going to stand up to the Pharisees and will be a champion for those pushed to the fringe of society. He will call on you to give your first allegiance to God. You better wash yourself up and get ready.

That is John's introduction. And he was saying, "Here's Jesus."