

"HARKING THE HERALD"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

There's an old newspaper story about a cub reporter who was sent out by his editor to get a story on a man who reportedly could sing tenor and bass at the same time. The cub reporter returned, reporting that there was really no story there at all. The editor couldn't understand it. "Couldn't the man sing tenor and bass at the same time?" "Yes" this young reporter answered, "but there was nothing exceptional about it. He had two heads."

How do you know what is newsworthy? What's a good story and what's commonplace? What's important and what isn't? What's going to affect the future of the world and what's just a passing fad? How do you know? It's hard to know!

WHAT'S NEWSWORTHY AND WHAT ISN'T?

Probably the most famous incident of underestimating the value of a top news story occurred with the flight of the Wright brothers' craft at Kittyhawk, North Carolina. Wilbur and Orville Wright were unlikely heroes from Dayton, Ohio. Incidentally their father was a Bishop in the Evangelical United Brethren Church so in a way we can claim the Wright Brothers as two of our famous sons since the EUB's and the Methodists merged in 1968.

At Kittyhawk, after a week of unsuccessful attempts and waiting for the wind to die down, they finally decided to go ahead. Orville lay down in the awkward saddle between the two wings, Wilbur cut the rope and the plane began to take off the ground. It climbed to ten feet, no higher, stayed in the air twelve seconds in that first flight. The brothers alternated flying it for three more attempts through that morning. On the fourth attempt the plane stayed in the air 58 seconds and flew 852 feet. That afternoon they wired their father, Bishop Wright, back in Ohio. The telegram read:

"We have made four successful flights this morning against a twenty-one mile per hour wind. We started from level with engine power alone, our average speed through the air 21 miles, the longest time in the air, 58 seconds. "

Well, the telegram operator who sent that message to Ohio shared it with a Norfolk, Virginia newspaper. They printed the story, then offered it to twenty-one other newspapers. Five out of the twenty-one bought it; two out of the five printed it - the Cincinnati Enquirer and the NY American. The Dayton Daily Journal, their hometown paper, had a copy of the telegram sent to the Bishop. They ran the story on page twelve under the caption, "Local Bicycle Merchants Expected Home for Christmas". It was later said that "newspaper editors didn't run the story for one reason - they knew man couldn't fly!"

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

How do you sort out what is newsworthy and what isn't? What's important and what is just superficial? The world changed in 1903. It's never been the same since. What happened at Kittyhawk in North Carolina was the beginning of a new age for mankind.

Who noticed it and why didn't they make the headlines? For one thing the Wright brothers were unlikely heroes...no one took them seriously. A man named Langley had tried to fly a machine a few weeks earlier off a barge on the Potomac. Now Langley was famous. He was a scientist, the head of the Smithsonian, a

prominent man in Washington. The whole world was there through its press corps to watch. It failed miserably, incidentally. He sent the craft off the end of the barge and it sank ingloriously into the Potomac, while the whole world watched through its press corps.

If Langley of the Smithsonian couldn't fly in Washington, how could the Wright brothers of Dayton fly in North Carolina? Besides that, they were very quiet, unassuming men...didn't talk much. Later on Wilbur would be asked to make a speech. Remember what he said, "The parrot is the only bird that talks, and it flies less than any other." (Pretty good.) He declined the invitation. They didn't talk about flying. They flew. And what made them even more inconspicuous is that the Wright Brothers were from the midwest - from Dayton, Ohio. Can anything important come out of Dayton, Ohio? They worked quietly, without notice, in a backwater place in unpretentious surroundings, in a bicycle shop of all places. That's like a carpenter's shop - a humble place. Without fanfare, without any desire for recognition, they just did what they felt was their life's calling. And they changed the world. I want you to keep this in mind as we look at our text for this morning.

#### JOHN THE BAPTIST

This is Advent, the season of preparation, so the Church looks to John the Baptist on this Second Sunday of Advent because John was the one who was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. And all the Gospel writers agree that John the Baptist is the one that Isaiah prophesied when he said, "The voice crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord."

Looking back on that event we assume that it must have been a momentous occasion, John the Baptist coming to town preceded by an advance team - the local sports arena reserved, the local campaign committee organized and at work, the local dignitaries lined up for appearances on opening day, the media all notified. That's the way it should have been, but the Bible delights in pointing out that it was not that way at all. The Bible reveals that God carries out his plan for the world through humble men and women who have no idea of the impact they are making. I believe that when God moves in the world He moves through it quietly and humbly with unlikely people in unexpected places.

Luke especially likes to tell the story of God's action in that way. Look at the Christmas story. Mary, a nobody really. A peasant girl. She sings her song, a beautiful song called "The Magnificat". "My soul doth magnify the Lord, for He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." The birth occurs in the lowliest of circumstances attended by shepherds. They're there as the witnesses. Matthew had kings there in his version of the story, but not Luke. Luke says only the shepherds were there. Nobody ever takes shepherds seriously. And at the circumcision when the baby is presented at the Temple for dedication, when High Priests and Kings and foreign dignitaries ought to be present for the dedication of a King, there is only Simeon there to witness it. A half-crazed old man who has been sitting at the Temple doorway for God knows how long. That's Simeon. He's the only one there. He sings his song, called the "Nunc Dimittis". "Now let thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation."

Luke delighted in pointing out that when God moved in the world He did it with unlikely people in unexpected places. And when he tells the story of John

the Baptist he makes no exception. Luke announces John's arrival on the stage with typical irony. He wants you to see the humor in it. Of all the people that God could have chosen - He chose John! He looked through all the important people who were available to be called. If they had been chosen, the world would have taken notice. He lists them. He starts at the top.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...". Tiberius followed Caesar Augustus as ruler of the Roman Empire. He ruled the largest Empire in the world for 23 years. That's a long time to be Emperor of Rome. "....Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea..." That means that Pilate was the most powerful person in the Middle East. "...Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea...Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene..." They were the sons of Herod the Great. The old man ruled all of Palestine when he was alive. He was a Monarch, but when he died his kingdom was split up four ways for his four sons. They were the fourth generation of a ruling dynasty. It looked as if the Herodians were going to stay in power forever. And then finally it means Annas and Caiaphas. Annas, the famous high priest now retired, Caiaphas his successor. But everybody knew that Annas was running the show in Jerusalem. even Luke knew that. That's why he says the high priests were Annas and Caiaphas, even though there can only be one high priest.

Well, that's quite a list of characters. They're all heavy-weights. Tiberius, Pilate, the Herodian brothers, the two high priests - he mentions them all. And then he says, "The word came to John the Baptist." Not to them, but to John the Baptist, sitting out in the hot desert eating grasshoppers and washing them down with wild honey. He sent John to preach repentance at the River Jordan in preparation for something great and mighty that was going to happen in the world.

NOBODY NOTICED IT Nobody noticed it. Not what was really happening. They assumed John was just another desert wild man, doing his thing. The authorities in those days just accepted those desert wild men for what they were, sort of local color. They tolerated them, unless they stepped outside of their expected role, which was to call the common people to repent of their little sins, and meddled in government, by calling the rulers to repent of their great big sins. And then they were dealt with the way Herod dealt with John the Baptist, put him in prison and then cut off his head and presented it to his brother's wife as a surprise climax to a wild party.

Luke wants you to see that while all this is going on, while Caesar and Pilate and the Herod boys and the high priests are going about building their kingdoms in the center of the stage, God was calling His Kingdom into being in the wings. The spotlights are still on Caesar and all of those - it always is. It still is today. The spotlight is always on the celebrity, always on those people who are prestigious, who are in power, and who are important. But here is the delicious irony, as Luke read history. All the while, in the wings, backstage, out of sight, except for those with eyes to see, another drama is underway. And this drama is going to change the world. Indeed, someday we believe it's going to save the world.

The Bible teaches you to see history this way. And people who read history trained with eyes by the Bible can never be pessimists. You can't be a pessimist and read the Bible.

The Bible will tell you that you don't know enough to be pessimistic about anything. All you know is what is important - who's on center stage and what's getting all the attention. You don't know what's going on in the shadows of history, in the backwater places, in the wings. You don't know enough to give up on anything yet. You can't say, I'm never going to make it now, not after this has happened. And if you say that then you're looking at the wrong things. You're looking only at the important things, and all the while what you thought was unimportant is forming new possibilities for your life behind your back.

OUR DISAPPOINTMENTS AND OUR FAILURES

And that's why you shouldn't get discouraged with disappointments or failures, either. Failure takes you out of the limelight. You've been trying to elbow your way through the chorus into the starring role and all of a sudden you fall on your face. You get tripped up and you fail and you move into the corner of the stage, into obscurity. That's where God always works. It has always been that way. He is always at work in obscurity, forming new possibilities without your knowledge. How else can you explain why so many people go through disappointments and failures in their life and discover that it was the best thing that ever happened to them?

Victor Hugo was banished by Napoleon to an island because of his political activity. And there he entered into the most creative and productive era of his professional life. After it was over he said, "Why wasn't I exiled earlier?"

You don't know enough to be pessimistic. You don't know enough to be cynical about the world. You don't know enough to despair about anything, either in the world out there or in your private world. All you know is what is important. And all the while, what is unimportant is transforming the world.

Moss Hart was talking about the theater when he wrote these lines, but I want you to listen to them as if they were talking about your life.

"To my jaundiced eye, the best directed play is the one in which the hand of the director remains unnoticed, when the play seems not to have been directed at all, but merely mirrors the overall perception and sensitivity of a hidden hand that has been the custodian of the proceedings."

"the overall perception and sensitivity of a hidden hand...that has been the custodian of the proceedings...."

The other month an item caught my attention in the newspaper. It was in the back pages so small that you could very easily have glanced over it and missed it. It was back in the section of the newspaper saved for things like "The Wright Brothers Flew Fifty-eight Seconds and Expected Home For Christmas". Things like that. It simply recorded that 135,000 Bibles went on sale in Peking and sold out. An insignificant event in a far away place. What impact are a few Bibles going to have on the future of the world? Just a voice crying in the wilderness, that's all it was.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH

But you and I know what that could mean. Two thousand years ago there was a man sent from God, whose name was John, sent to be the herald of a new day. He was a voice "crying in the wilderness". "Nothing will come of it" they probably said. "What good could one man possibly have against the powers of the world? Just a voice "crying in the

wilderness. Nothing more. Couldn't mean much, "unless the hand of the director remains unnoticed". And then while we anxiously follow what we suppose to be important - Tiberius, Pilate, the Herod brothers, the High Priests - what is unimportant is quietly at work behind their backs, transforming the world without their knowledge, reminding us that the words of Isaiah are still true:

"The grass withers, the flower fades; but  
the Word of our God will stand forever."

PRAYER        Make us sensitive in these moment, O God, to your presence and  
                  your nearness. We remember how you were at work in the life of  
John the Baptist and are mindful of how you move in our world...quietly and  
humbly, lifting up unlikely people in unexpected ways to fulfill your  
purpose.    In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord, we pray.