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9:00 a.m. Christian Education

**10:00 a.m. Worship**

Children's Sunday School during Worship



## ***"The Ease of Deception"***

**Matthew 11:2-11**

**December 12, 2010**

**Rev. Barbara Royle**



The Christmas story we know so well begins with the dramatic encounter of the angel Gabriel making two separate appearances; the first to Zechariah, a priest and the husband of Elizabeth, and the second to Mary, engaged to Joseph. Elizabeth was past child bearing age and Mary was just a young girl. Elizabeth had long been barren, and Mary, nearly a child herself, was probably fourteen and newly engaged to Joseph. But as Gabriel announced, "Nothing is impossible with God" and the story unfolds.

Elizabeth and Mary are related and both are about to conceive and bear a son who is destined to change the world forever. Their names have been chosen by God: Elizabeth will deliver John who is to prepare the way for the Messiah, and Mary will give birth to the long awaited Messiah, who shall be called Jesus.

We know very little about their childhood but know they both came from strong families of faith. John's parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, both came from a priestly heritage, with Zechariah currently a priest. Joseph and Mary, from the house of David, have been carefully selected to raise the One who will become Lord for eternity.

As Jesus and John grew up, I suspect this amazing story, of how their birth came to be, was shared with them as part of their family history. It was a story of joy and anticipation, of purpose and faith. Their birth and who they were to become, was to be for all people and for all time. They were raised in families of deep faith and obedience, highlighting for all people that nothing is impossible for God, when we choose to follow; not for them, nor for us either.

We enter our story years later, with both John and Jesus certain from the beginning of their mission; one living in the desert and one near the city; one in the North of Israel and one in the South, traveling throughout.

Scholars believe that John lived and worked near the Dead Sea, within the Qumran community. There is enough evidence to think that John may have belonged to the Essenes, a strict religious group, who practiced celibacy. They

were scribes, dedicated to laboriously recording the Scriptures by hand, that were discovered in this cave in 1946. This has led scholars to believe that Jesus may have been one of John's followers before beginning his ministry, baptized in the Jordan River at the juncture where the river runs into the Dead Sea. This was also declared as a place of significance, in my class in Israel this past summer.

John is clear about his call to prepare the way for Jesus. He is fully dedicated to preparing the people, who don't know about God, so that they would be able to hear and receive the teachings of Jesus. John is not a false evangelist, seeking to convert others to his way. He is rather one chosen by God to let the people know who Jesus, God incarnate, is. He knows that to withhold this life-giving information would be harmful to others.

So here he was, living in the desert, charged with sharing this shocking news of who Jesus really was. It was not an easy call to ministry, even though he had many followers. John knew who he was and what he was called to do. Just like today, each of us is called to tell the story, our story based on our experience of God. Our job is not to convert others; that is God's work. But we are most certainly not to withhold the Good News from others either. Like John, we too can be considered strange, but we are not to be concerned about the reaction of others. We are to share our faith and invite someone to come and see for themselves. You and I enjoy the benefits of faith because someone first told us. The message of Jesus is not for us alone.

The world then was not unlike today, where false prophets proclaim their own importance. They tell us about Jesus, leaving us to determine what is real and what is not. Deception was easy; false gods were everywhere; magicians played the crowds; and people upheld harmful lifestyles. They were vulnerable to being deceived, and so too are we.

Aware of the power of deception, John the Baptist, from jail, sends a messenger to see if Jesus is the Messiah. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John wanted to be sure Jesus was the person. Now, surely he knows the answer; Jesus is his cousin after all. But perhaps John wanted his own followers to discover for themselves what he already knew, so that they too might believe.

John never wavered from his call to ministry and was not one to be easily deceived. He knew what God had asked him to do and knew God had equipped him to do just that. John knew, despite his large following, that he was to prepare the way for the Messiah, not to become one. John was as opposed as Jesus to the Pharisees and Sadducees who saw themselves as more important than others. He was aware of the division of people; those who were looking for the Messiah; those who worshipped false gods, and those who didn't have any idea about God. John knew it was easy to be deceived and he was intent on alerting the people to this danger.

There was also a sense of urgency to prepare the people for who was coming. They were to repent from their sinful ways; the current king was not to be worshipped, for there was soon to be a new king, who would be different from anyone else.

John was an odd kind of guy. Disheveled, living in the desert, eating honey and locusts, wearing a camel hair cloak; one would think such an image would not draw others, but he did. I suspect that his image was familiar to those living in the desert. He was focused on telling the story, and like today, some would accept and others would reject, but those who had ears to hear would be saved.

John was not one to follow the crowd. He refused to bow down to the political leaders, whatever the consequences, even jail. And against religious protocol, baptized women, soldiers, tax collectors, prostitutes; all who repented of their sinful ways. Because of this John was a threat to the status quo. Kings and religious authorities practiced deception to elevate themselves and John was intent on exposing it so that the believers would be ready when the Messiah came. Isn't this essential for us too?

I think when it comes to receiving the Messiah in our own hearts; we too, can be easily deceived. Recently I came across a copy of the comedian George Carlin's routine on stuff; perhaps you remember it. He relates, "A house is just a pile of stuff. You can see that when you're taking off on an airplane. You look down; you see that everybody's got a little pile of stuff; all the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff; especially the shiny stuff." "That's what your house is," he concludes, "a place to keep your stuff, while you go out and get.... more stuff."

We all know that Christmas has turned into the frantic search for stuff to give to those we love. But we can be deceived at Christmas, forgetting who or what it is, we celebrate.

One author writes: "The holiday season is a spiritual time but also a celebration of stuff. It starts the day after Thanksgiving, when more than 100 million Americans participate in the shopping rush called Black Friday. It accelerates through Advent, as people max out their credit cards buying presents for family members and friends. It reaches a crescendo on Christmas Eve, as people check off the last items on their shopping lists. Then it continues the next week as people snatch up even more stuff at after-Christmas sales. Retailers depend on the holiday season for their financial health because this quarter of the year produces most of—or all—their profits.

Through it all we can too easily be deceived into thinking this is what Christmas is all about; but it's not. Sure, it's fun to give and receive presents, but where does most of that stuff end up? In closets, bookshelves, garages, counters, attics and basements. "We are in a stuff crisis," writes DeNeen Brown. "We are either consuming it, acquiring it, complaining about it, cleaning it, or moving it from store to car to house to garage. We are worried about it, bored about it, or happy about it. Our stuff has become our baggage."

And who needs more baggage? I have been thinking a lot about my stuff at home recently too. Everywhere I look, it seems there is unused, undusted, unimportant stuff, that is cluttering up my life. One has to spend time thinking about it, moving it, packaging it, fixing it; time spent taking care of my stuff instead time spent in more enjoyable ways.

In our culture, we are seduced into believing that consumption—the economic kind—is always a good thing. It's good for the merchants who earn a living; good for the customers who acquire products they want; and good for the economy. But this rationalization is a sure way to slip into deception as we risk crowding out the reason for the season.

It's too easy to allow the world to drown out the Word of God. It's too easy to give up our time to maintain our stuff instead of caring for our hearts. It's too easy to listen to the world's clamor instead of listening for Jesus. It's too easy to run in a frenzied rush instead of resting peacefully in the arms of God.

Some stuff is necessary to live in our time and place, but we can too easily run the risk of deception that can blind us from God's promises of long lasting joy. In this passage, I can hear John preparing the way for us too, can't you? Get ready, for the Messiah is coming to be with you. Do away with all that deafens you. Be ready, for the world's promises are temporary, but God's promises are forever. Be ready, so you don't miss the Messiah who comes for all, who believe. Amen

Reflection:

How will we prepare our hearts for the Christ child?

Will we hear Christ in the Christmas story? Or will the clamor of the ads draw us more? Will we see him in the kindness of another or will the demands of the world blind us? Will we tell others of Christ through the sharing of our story? Or keep it for ourselves? Will we follow the Star of David, or will we put our hope in the stuff of the world?