Sunday, December 10, 1989
ELIZABETH, ZECHARIAH AND JOHN
Matthew 3:1-12

There are a number of people connected with the Advent and Christmas story that we tend to forget or think of as less important characters. Today's sermon is about some of these people. They are important because they are a part of the preparation for the birth of the Savior.

Events that change the world never happen in a vacuum. The seeds for change are being sown all the time and in unlikely and surprising places. Then one day, a major change begins to take place where we had not expected it. Think, for example, of what's been happening in Eastern Europe these past weeks. No one expected it to happen as rapidly and as soon as it did. But the seeds for the change were being planted all along. It's not something that happened without a lot of preparation.

According to the Bible, God had been preparing our world for the coming of Jesus for a long, long time. And just as God's entrance into the world in the baby Jesus took place as a historical event in time and space, so also God's preparation for the Christ event took place in historical events and people.

God's preparation for Christmas is told in the story of a people, a community that God chose for this purpose.

When this community first comes into view in the Old Testament, it is a Semitic clan or group of clans wandering between two great civilizations centered upon the Euphrates and the Nile Rivers in the Middle East. Then we learn of the call and the promise to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, including Moses and the prophets.

After weavings and wanderings, this chosen people appears as a nation, bearing the national name of Israel, settled in its own territory, governed by its native chieftains and kings. But the life of this little nation is not smooth. There is war and civil war, the kingdoms decline and fall, and the community ceases to exist as an independent state. With the Babylonian conquest, it is absorbed into the all-embracing empire of the Middle East, which under various dynasties persisted through many centuries of the ancient world. But God's promises and God's word are kept alive. Prophets are raised up who continually remind the people of their covenant and their heritage.

Then God's community appears in a new form. A small group of exiles organizes itself as a partly autonomous community under the authority of the imperial government. The restored community is neither monarchy nor republic. Its rulers are the priests. Its legal code is the law of God. It has its center in the temple in Jerusalem with a small amount of contiguous territory. It is into this community and heritage that Jesus is born.

The first chapter of Matthew's Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus with Sarah and Abraham and traces it through the twelve tribes of the Hebrew people up to the birth in Bethlehem.

Out of this tradition and history came Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist — all three being part of the preparation for the birth and ministry of Jesus. This morning we are going to

look especially at the message of John the Baptist, but before doing that, we need to know something about his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah.

According to tradition, Elizabeth was a cousin of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, was a priest in the Jewish religion and was assigned to the temple in Jerusalem. For some unknown reason, Elizabeth and Zechariah had been unable to have children and were now beyond normal child-bearing age.

One day, when Zechariah was serving his regular assigned shift in the temple, and it was his job to burn the incense, he had a vision. In the vision, he was told that he and his wife's prayers had been answered. Elizabeth would bear a son, and he should be named John. The vision also informed Zechariah that this child, when an adult, would be an important preparer of the way for the Messiah. "He will make a people ready for their Lord."

Zechariah found it difficult to believe. His wife was too old to have a child. However, the messenger in the vision informed him that it would happen as predicted and further told Zechariah that because he doubted God's promise, he would not be able to speak another word until the child was born. Perhaps Zechariah was so surprised that he would have been speechless anyway.

In the meantime, Mary had also been visited by a messenger of God and was told that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Savior and that her cousin Elizabeth was already pregnant and that her child would be an important forerunner for the ministry of Jesus. According to tradition, Elizabeth was about six months pregnant when Mary got the news that she too would be having a baby.

It happened as predicted. When Elizabeth and Zechariah's baby was born, the power of speech returned to Zechariah, and they named their son John.

Early on, it was obvious that the child was a deeply religious person. He seemed to know that he had a special mission in life — that of being one who helps prepare the way — a forerunner.

We don't know anything else about John's childhood. We can assume that as he was growing up, he gained a deep appreciation for the strengths and weaknesses of his own religious tradition. In the gospel stories, we next meet him as an outspoken and dynamic prophet. The gospel stories do not tell us what happened to his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The central theme of John the Baptist's preaching was: "Be prepared. Get ready. God is coming among us in a new way. Repent. Change your ways. Be baptized as a sign that your life is turning in a new direction."

This was a difficult and even insulting message to many of the people of his time. They prided themselves on their religious heritage, and many seemed to believe that because they were born into that religious tradition, that was all that was needed.

However, John the Baptist said, "Simply being born into a religious tradition is not enough. To be able to say that we are descendants of Abraham and Sarah makes no difference in and of itself." To put it in contemporary terms, it's not enough to say that you come from a long line of religious people.

Inheriting a rich religious heritage is a valuable asset, but there comes a time when you have to claim that heritage as your own and make it a part of your daily life. You cannot live forever on the faith of your ancestors. You need to make it your own faith.

Some people will say, “I don’t have to worry; I come from the John Doe family,” or “I’m white Anglo-Saxon Protestant,” or “My ancestors came over on the Mayflower,” or “I come from a long line of royalty,” or “My family has been Methodist all the way back to John and Charles Wesley.”

Pride in one’s heritage is one thing, but thinking that therefore automatically some special status has been conferred upon you, or that God is particularly on your side more than someone else’s, is a misunderstanding of God. Thus, John the Baptist warned the people of his time, “It’s not enough merely to be able to say, ‘We are Abraham’s and Sarah’s descendants.’”

Many years ago, a play appeared on the Broadway stage that dealt with the declining fortunes of the English aristocracy after World War II. It was a comedy, and its plot revolved largely around a young nobleman’s rebellion against his blue-blooded family.

In one scene, the defiant son tells his parents what he thinks of them and their way of life and does so in dramatic terms. “You are,” he says, “parasites and exploiters. You fatten on the flesh of the toiling masses and drink the sweat of others’ brows. I am resolved to have nothing further to do with you. From this moment on, consider me dead. You no longer have a son.”

His father, a patient man, has taken this outburst quietly. But he finally breaks in to pose a question. “That’s all very well, but how do you propose to live?” At this point, the young fellow squares his meager shoulders, thrusts out an unimpressive chin, and replies, “I shall have to learn to get by on my allowance.”

John the Baptist was saying to the people of his time that they had been living on the spiritual allowance of their ancestors, but they needed more than that. He warned them that it’s not sufficient to be able to say, “We come from a long line of very religious and faithful people. We have our spiritual allowance, which will always come to us.”

Nor is it sufficient for us. We always have to claim our spiritual heritage as our own. So many people who come from a Christian background have felt that they could neglect the cultivation of their own faith and continue to live on their allowance from the past.

Remembering and celebrating Christmas is a first step. The celebration reminds us of our heritage all the way back into the Old Testament and of the fact that we are also children of Abraham and Sarah and Elizabeth and Zechariah.

But then we have to go beyond the remembering and reclaim that faith in God as our own.

There are those whose lives have to be broken completely before they are ready to make their heritage their own. Here’s the story of one young woman. As a teenager, Beverly had gotten caught up in the craziness of the late sixties. A bright young woman, she had started experimenting with drugs in her junior year in high school. She dropped out of college midway through her freshman year and drifted into a life of sex and drugs. Her distraught parents heard from her only when she needed money, and when they stopped sending it to her, she broke off all contact. They had no way of knowing where she was living or even if she was

alive. Then one morning, Beverly woke up in a shabby apartment, in the bed of a man she didn't even like, and said to herself, "I don't want to live like this anymore." She went home. Her parents welcomed their prodigal daughter with the proverbial fatted calf. The first thing Beverly did was take a long, hot bath and wash her hair, not only for relaxation and hygiene, but as a symbolic washing away of the sordid past she was leaving behind. It was a kind of second personal baptism. Instinctively, without realizing why, she felt she needed to immerse her body as a symbolic rebirth to a newer, cleaner sense of herself. Next, she told her parents she wanted to go to their church. She felt she had messed up her life and had to find her way back to God.

They took her the next Sunday morning to the worship service. There she heard the good news that she understood as being something like this: "God sees how contemptible you have made your life, and God is prepared to lift you out of the mud, wipe away your filth, and accept you as God's own. You are forgiven. Welcome back." Now she claimed her Christian heritage as her own. From then on, her life began to change for the better.

And when we make this Jesus of our long heritage our own, amazing things begin to happen. And one of the most important things that happens to us is that we begin to see all the world in a new way. After all, our Christian faith is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, or a series of rituals. Our Christian heritage and faith are first and foremost a way of seeing. It can't change the facts about the world we live in, but it can change the way we see those facts. It's a way of seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus. So, for example, when you see a broken-down homeless person, you see more than that — you see an individual made in the image of God. You see Jesus in that person.

All human beings become your brothers and sisters. You see the creation as being good and as a gift, and life has a joy that it never had before. You no longer worry about whether you have more or less than your neighbors. You don't have to buy self-esteem as represented by a larger home or a more expensive car.

You begin to turn away from your self-centeredness and begin to live in a new harmony with other people. God takes over and does what you cannot do, and the broken pieces of life are put together again. The joy you feel during this Advent and Christmas season becomes a year-round experience.

This is what John the Baptist was asking the people of his time to do — to begin to see the world and others around them in a fresh way. And he further said to them, "Get ready, for God is entering our world and our lives in a new way."

This Advent and Christmas season proclaims to us the age-old good news that God continues to enter our world and our lives in a new way. Be open to that Spirit of God, and you will find a joy that is deeper than you ever believed possible. Amen.