

Luke 3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

5 Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

## BE PREPARED

Be prepared. That’s the Boy Scout motto, and that’s the message of Advent as well. Be prepared for the coming of Jesus.

Last week we talked about several ways to be prepared, to get ready for the coming Christ into our lives. Using apocalyptic imagery Jesus challenged our assumptions. Instead of being weighed down by the problems and the cares of this world, we were encouraged lift up our heads

We were encouraged to look up instead of about.

We were reminded that faith is not just a celebration of the past. Faith is actively living for the future. We were challenged to put the disappointments of our life in the context of God’s promises and plans.

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

Today another prophet speaks to us about how to prepare for Jesus. He is the one who first introduced Jesus to the world, John the Baptist.

Luke is very careful to put the ministry of John in the context of world history. Luke tells us that when John first received the word of the Lord in the wilderness, Tiberius was Emperor in Rome, Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests, and a couple guys whose names I can’t pronounce were rulers in the other districts.

I agree with commentator William Barclay on this. The reason Luke dates the emergence of John the Baptist in no fewer than six different ways is because Luke thinks that this is one of the “hinges on which history turned.”

Once again we see that God often comes to us in surprising ways. God’s word did not come to the political and religious leaders of the day. God’s word did not come to us in the temple or the palaces of power.

God’s word came to an ordinary man who preached his disturbing message of hope in the wilderness.

Before Jesus started his ministry, John prepared the way. And if we hope to experience the presence of Christ in a new and vital way this Advent a good place to start is with the one who originally introduced Jesus to the world.

Every year when we make our way to the manger to see the Christ child, we must first take a detour into the wilderness and hear the words of this strange prophet.

Actually John seems a lot stranger to us than he seemed to those who first heard him. If someone appeared among us wearing a camel’s hair coat and snacking on locusts dipped in honey, we would probably call 911.

But, John’s appearance in the wilderness long ago was not so shocking to some. He dressed like a prophet. He ate like a prophet. He spoke like a prophet in the wilderness, a place where God’s people had often experienced the Divine Presence before.

Those who longed for a Messiah suspected the connection right away. They asked: Could this man be Elijah, that prophet of old who was so faithful that he was taken directly up into heaven? Could this man be Elijah, the one who will come to prepare the way for God’s Savior?

Word quickly spread and many people made their way into the wilderness to hear John preach. John said, “Yes I do come to prepare the way for the Messiah. He’s coming soon so now is the time to get ready.”

## HOW TO PREPARE

And how did this prophet tell the people to prepare for Jesus? Should they prepare by having a party every day of the week? Should they prepare with bright lights and gift giving?

No, the preparation that John suggested was the preparation of baptism. The Bible tells us that John preached a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” around all the region of the Jordan. In other words John told God’s people that they needed to get ready by being baptized.

The point that we miss is this. God's people didn't need to be baptized. If you were born a Jew you were always a Jew. You were always a part of God's family.

On the other hand, if you were a Gentile and wanted to become a Jew, then you had to be reborn.

The waters of baptism symbolized this rebirth. You literally took a bath to wash away the old way of life.

But, now in anticipation of the coming Messiah Jews were being baptized. When the Messiah comes it will be a dramatic new day. Everyone needs to embrace this outward sign of an inward and spiritual work, repentance.

Whenever I teach on this passage we always seem to have a discussion about the mode of baptism.

Since John baptized in the Jordan River does mean that he baptized by immersion? Are the Baptists right?

Should we also go down to the river when it comes time for a baptism?

John very well may have "dunked" those who wanted to be baptized as a sign of their repentance.

But, the important point is not how much water was used.

The important point is that the baptism represented a total personal commitment to go in a different direction.

## REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

That's what repentance means. It means a complete change of mind and a complete change of conduct.

I often use a phrase from the Apostle Paul as a declaration of pardon in our worship service. If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a "new creation." This is not something that we can do on our own, but by the power of God's Spirit we can go in a different direction. Salvation is a possibility. Rebirth is an option.

But, it is only an option if we are honest to God about who we really are. We are sinners who need be forgiven. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

When John baptized God's people they were admitting that sin was not just a problem for those Gentiles. Sin was a problem for them as well. They weren't ready for the kingdom to come. They need to get their hearts and minds right before God.

When I teach about repentance and forgiveness, the talk often turns to those "other people" who obviously need to repent. But, the message of Advent is universal.

John tells us, "Don't worry about those unbelieving Gentiles. Worry about yourself. Time is short. Now is the time to repent and go in a different direction."

### LIFE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

I read once about a lady who was doing her Christmas shopping. Her arms were filled with packages, and she accidentally bumped into a fellow shopper. The packages all fell to the floor, and the woman was obviously extremely upset by this.

Sympathetic shoppers helped her quickly gather her packages, and as she headed out the door she was heard to say, "I just hate Christmas. It turns everything upside down."

Many of us can sympathize with her frustration.

But, what she said is true on a deeper level. Christmas does turn everything upside down. When Jesus comes, the world will change.

There is no more business as usual, and we better get ready to be turned upside down and inside out. We better get ready for the life changing experience of repentance if we expect to follow Jesus.

### LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR

John seems hopelessly out of place in the modern day landscape of feel good religion. A popular TV preacher recently began his sermon by saying,

"You are good! You mean well. You want to have a happy life, but these negative naysayers keep dragging you down." He then advised a massive crowd of followers to look in the mirror each morning and say, "I will have a good day. I will believe in me!"

John tells us that when we look in the mirror we will be in for a shock. John begins his sermon by saying,

"You aren't right. God demands that you be transformed. God demands that you be born again. God is coming into your life to turn everything upside down and inside out."

That's what we mean when we talk about a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is a radical complete change. Repentance needs to be more than putting lipstick on a pig. Repentance is turning a pig's ear into a silk purse.

That's how we get ready for Jesus. That's how we find forgiveness and salvation.

Now you might rightly say, "That's impossible. You can't change a pig's ear into a silk purse, and I can't change my life completely."

And I would say, "You're right. But, the miracle of Christmas is this: when God turns us upside down and inside out and our life is scattered on the floor, he compassionately lifts us up again. God forgives us and frees us to live in a new way. God can change a pig's ear into a silk purse."

We think that John's message of repentance is bad news. We don't like the idea of staring in the mirror and seeing the harsh truth. We would rather just take a quick glance in the mirror and continue to believe the fiction that we're not so bad after all.

But, there is no salvation in that lie. After all, if we do not know that we are sick, how can we be ready to receive the healing and forgiveness that can be ours in Christ Jesus?

The Bible tells us that repentance is good news, and the good news is this: our lives can change. God can heal our sin sick soul. With God all things are possible. The Messiah is coming soon, and it is this hope that enables us to be honest to God. It is this hope that makes repentance possible.

## PREPARING THE WAY

John's ministry was the fulfillment of a prophecy made by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah heard a voice crying in the wilderness. And the voice said,

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

In ancient times when the king would come to visit the highways would be repaired. The potholes would be filled in and the winding roads would be straightened. That was how they prepared for royalty. And in the same way God's people were to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

William Barclay told of a Coronation Service in Westminster Abbey. He wrote,

“When the entire congregation was seated, a squad of cleaners unexpectedly emerged with brushes and vacuum cleaners and proceeded to sweep the carpets absolutely clean for the coming of the Queen. So John is regarded as the courier of the King. But, the preparation on which he insisted was a preparation of the heart and of the life.”

John was saying, “Since the king of Kings is coming you need to do more than smooth out your roads. You need to mend you lives. You need to repent.”

John said that the people needed to prepare a spiritual road in their hearts to accommodate the arrival of their Savior and King.

And that’s what I think we need to do as well. In order to get ready for Jesus we too have to chop off some mountains, fill in some valleys, and straighten out some crooked roads. The landscape of our lives must change in order to accommodate the presence of Christ.

#### A LESSON FROM AA

I was looking at the Alcoholic’s Anonymous brochure rack in our fellowship hall, and it occurred to me that the 12 steps of AA are quite similar to the biblical idea of repentance.

Those who are addicted to alcohol can’t seem to make any progress until they admit that their life is out of control and only God can help them go in a different direction. That’s step one.

But, they don’t leave it at that. Once they make the commitment to quit drinking, they also attempt to constantly monitor own their behavior, make amends to those that they have harmed by their drinking and help each other lead a sober lifestyle.

I think that the 12 step process is not only a good one for those who are trying to avoid the pitfalls of alcohol abuse but also for Christians who want to prepare for the coming of Christ. We might not have a problem with alcohol, but we all have a problem with something. We all have some area in life that is out of control and needs to be cleaned up.

If you say that’s not so, that you’re doing just fine, I would reply that you’re kidding yourself. That’s why John had such a harsh message. In Luke 3:7-8 John tells the multitude that had come to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ... Bring forth fruits in keeping with your repentance ...”

#### NO MORE FLUFFY SERMONS

There was urgency to John’s message. It was not a fluffy “I’m okay, you’re okay” kind of message. It was a clarion call to change because if they didn’t change the results would be tragic.

Sometimes I think that if I have failed in my job to preach the gospel it has been on this very point. I have not prepared people for the coming of Jesus because I didn't want to offend. I have rounded off the sharp edges of the message to make it more palatable.

At a recent conference on preaching a speaker said, "People don't come to church to be judged, to be criticized, and made to feel uncomfortable. Laity come to church to be stroked, to be patted on the head and told that they are doing fine just as they are."

And so the theme of many sermons becomes, "God loves you just the way you are; promise you'll never change a thing."

But, if that's true, what do we do with John? What do we do with this harsh voice crying in the wilderness?

I guess that we could give thanks that we only have to talk about him one or two times in the church year. The rest of the time we can think about the coming of sweet Jesus from whom never was heard a discouraging word.

But, some of you know better. Why do you think they crucified Jesus? They crucified him because he told people things that they didn't want to hear. He told them the unvarnished truth about themselves.

The people weren't ready for that kind of Savior. And let's face it. We're not ready for that kind of Savior either.

We have to prepare ourselves. We have to step into the bathtub of repentance and get cleaned up. We have to find those valleys in our life that need to be filled in and those mountains that need to be chopped off.

The message of Advent seems quite sober when all around us the drumbeat of celebration is in full swing. But, I would suggest that the way to true joy begins in the wilderness.

In the wilderness of our failure we recognize that our only hope is in that baptism which comes from above.

Our only hope is in that grace and forgiveness that only God can provide.

#### GOOD NEWS IN OUR PAIN

William Willimon recalled hearing Dr. Norman Vincent Peale speak to the South Carolina Realtor's Convention. Before Dr. Peale spoke he was introduced by one of their salesmen.

He said,

“This has been the worst year in real estate that I can remember. I know all of you and I know that you’re trying to put a happy face on your pain. That pasted on smile you’re wearing tonight doesn’t fool anybody.

The man you’re about to hear tonight knows you. And what he says is going to be the best news that you’ve gotten all year. I give you Dr. Norman Vincent Peale.”

Willimon said that with that introduction Dr. Peale couldn’t fail.

In a way this real estate salesman’s introduction was a lot like John the Baptist’s introduction of Jesus.

John told the contented self-satisfied religious folk that they needed to change. Their religious pedigree was no guarantee that they could escape the judgment of God.

But, the good news was this. They could change. They didn’t have to settle for the life they were leading. The one who was coming knew them very well and yet he was willing to forgive them. The one who was coming was going to give them the best news they had ever heard.

I bet some of you here today want more than anything else to change the life you’re living. I bet some of you are dying to hear John preach. You want to hear someone who really believes that things can be different.

Don’t be fooled. Change, real change doesn’t come easily. John’s words can be very harsh and difficult to hear.

But, John’s words introduce us to the author of our salvation. He is the one who comes to rock the world, turn over the tables, put the demons to rout, and raise the dead.

Do you want to get ready for the one who comes? Come and hear a voice crying in the wilderness. Listen to the one who prepares the way of the Lord.

Amen.