

Luke 3:1-6

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.”

A DETOUR IN THE WILDERNESS

This is the second Sunday of Advent. We are preparing for the coming of Jesus.

And the one who prepares us for His coming today is John the Baptist. John is the one who leads the song that began our worship for today. His ministry is prelude to the ministry of Jesus.

Every year before we can 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.

How did John the Baptist tell the people to prepare for Jesus?

Did he tell them to prepare by having a party every day of the week? Did he tell them to prepare with bright lights and gift giving?

No, the preparation that John suggested was the preparation of repentance. 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 repenting of their sins and by being baptized,

The point that we often 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. What did this mean?

According to John, when the Messiah comes it will be a dramatic new day. Everyone will need to repent.

And the same is true for us.

In order to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus we too need to do the hard work of repentance.

REPENTANCE

But, what is repentance? Simply put repentance means to go in a different direction.

Think of it this way. If you make a wrong turn on a trip, you usually recognize your mistake. How do you correct that mistake?

You turn around and go in a different direction.

(Unless you're a man. Then you just keep going and hope the wrong road leads to where you want to go. But, sometimes even we men have to backtrack and go in a different direction.)

If you ask the man or woman on the street what repentance means, nine out of ten will say repentance means to be sorry. Now there is an element of sorrow in repentance, but sorrow is not enough.

We can be sorry and still keep going in the wrong direction. We can be sorry that we made the wrong turn on the trip, but our sorrow doesn't mean that we're going in the right direction.

In order to change our direction we have to turn the car around.

And in order to repent we have to turn our lives around. We have to go in a different direction. That's what repentance means. It means a complete change of mind and a complete change of conduct.

I often quote 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, God can do it. The God of creation can recreate us. By the power of God's Spirit we can go in a different direction. Salvation is a possibility. Rebirth is an option.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

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 other people, those dirty Gentiles. Sin was a problem for them as well. They weren't ready for the kingdom to come. They needed 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. We all need to repent.

John tells us,

“Don’t worry about those other people, those unbelieving Gentiles. Worry about yourself. Time is short. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to go in a different direction.”

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

“Brothers and sisters you are messed up. And God loves you too much to leave you like this.

God demands that you be transformed. God demands that you be born again.

But, there is good news.

This holy God is coming near. The Messiah is coming, and the world will never be the same again. You will never be the same.

The world can be different. You can be different.”

SALVATION NOW!

I heard of Christian group whose motto was: “We believe in life before death.”

That’s what John was talking about. Salvation begins now because God was in Christ.

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

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

And I would say, "You're right. You can't do that."

But, the miracle of Christmas is this: when God comes near, when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, pigs ears can be turned into a silk purse. Repentance is possible. God forgives us and frees us to live in a new way."

Some 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.

As painful it is I have to take a long hard look in the mirror each morning. It's the only way that I can know what needs to change.

And the same is true when it comes to our spiritual life. We can only repent and receive God's forgiveness if we know the hard truth about ourselves.

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: we 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.

PREPARE THE WAY

John's ministry was the fulfillment of a prophecy made by 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, God's king. 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.

At a 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.”

With teaching like that, 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 that demands that we look in the mirror?

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.

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.

LONGING FOR A SAVIOR

Whenever I read this passage I think about my first church. I was writing a sermon on this passage in my office late at night. A couple from my parish showed up unannounced. They were getting a divorce.

I tried to talk them out of it. But, I seemed more interested in preserving the marriage than they. After a couple hours of conversation they left in tears and in separate cars.

Merry Christmas.

Then, I got a call from the clerk of session. It seemed that the elders didn't like the way I was doing the adult Sunday school class. The session had met without me and had called a meeting to be held just before the worship service that coming Sunday.

Joy to the World.

What could happen next?

Well, I got a call from my mother. My father had just gone back into the hospital with heart problems.

A profound sense of sadness came over me. This was not turning out to be a Silent Holy Night.

In fact, God seemed far away. I was in the wilderness.

And so I went into the sanctuary, which was decorated for the season, turned on a few lights and stood in the pulpit.

I thought about all the problems in my life and in the lives of my members. I thought about families that were struggling just to keep body and soul together that Advent season.

And I felt compelled to sing an Advent song. "O Come, O come Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel." And, by the way God, ransom me too.

The sound echoed off the empty pews. But, the words were not empty. That mournful tune offered me a word of hope.

Believe me. When you are the one in exile that song takes on new life.

And for the first time I knew what it really meant to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

I knew what it meant to repent, to go in a different direction. I knew what it meant to be forgiven. I knew what it meant to trust not in what I could do but in what God could do through me.

The salvation of God came near that night. A voice was crying in the wilderness. The way of the Lord was prepared.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that our whole life is Advent, “a time of waiting for the ultimate, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when all people are brothers and sisters” and we rejoice in the words of the angels, “Peace on earth.”

Bonhoeffer wrote, “Learn to wait because he has promised to come.”

What about you? Are you in exile? Are you overwhelmed? Are you disappointed in your life? Are you discouraged?

Let us learn to wait.

Let us hear that voice crying in the wilderness. Let prepare the way of the Lord.

And let us long for that Day when the whole world will see the salvation of God.

Amen.