

Preparing A Way

December 6, 2009

Luke 3:1 – 6

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the 3rd Chapter of Luke, verses 1 through 6. Please listen for the reading of God's Word for His people.

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶And all mankind will see God's salvation.' "

This is the Word of God and It can be trusted!

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

Oh Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the meditations of our hearts. Prepare us, oh Lord, your servants, for the receiving of Your Word. Open our eyes that we may see, our hearts that we may feel, our ears that we may hear and our minds that we may come to understand all that you have to offer us today. In Christ wonderful and holy name we pray. Amen!

In preparing for this week's sermon, it would be tempting to jump ahead and begin to concentrate our thoughts on the message that John the Baptist brings prior to the start of Jesus' ministry. Whenever John the Baptist is brought into discussion, we often find ourselves bombarded with the imagery of a wild John; long-haired, dressed in the skins of wild animals, wandering the wilderness eating locust and honey crying out to the people – Repent – The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Now I have to admit, this type of imagery does much to cater to our sense of adventure and the words of John is an exciting message; one that caught the attention of many in John's time. His message was so compelling that the bible tells us that people flocked to him; leaving their homes and familiar surroundings to go out into the wilderness to hear what John had to say. I believe to jump ahead and to look deeply at the

message itself without discernment of the preparation involved in bringing this message would only serve to invalidate the use of the lectionary; which if you recall is in place to keep us from preaching those adventurous, exciting passages without taking the time to look at the text surrounding them. If we take time to peek ahead to next week's lectionary, we would see that the verses that follow Luke 3:1 – 6 speak exactly to our expectations and in turn to the heart of the message that John is bringing to the Jewish Nation and so next week we will have the opportunity to learn about the *good news* John brought into the wilderness. And so that leaves us with today's reading; a reading that speaks about preparing and John's role in readying a broken world for the arrival of their long awaited Messiah.

Notice that Luke begins Chapter 3 with a little history lesson. Luke's attention to the concrete and historical facts serves to remind us that this is not meant to be ready as a fairy tale. The story of John is not "once upon a time," but rather a very specific time. Luke wants his readers to understand that this story is grounded in the hard reality of the world they knew it. The word of the Lord came to John in the midst of politics and power that even we today have come to know so well. Not only was the world in which John lived in need of a Messiah, they were ready for one and so it was up to John to help prepare them for His arrival.

Making paths straight is a key command here; one which I think we often misunderstand by focusing, again, on the *good news* that follows today's reading. We often combine the word of John about repentance with the message that he and the prophet Isaiah spoke about when they spoke of preparing a way for the Lord in the wilderness, and we conclude that we are the ones who must do the work of making level every mountain; raising up every valley and smoothing every rough place. Well if that's not the message, than what is?

I see John's message to be one of grace. Do you know what grace is? Grace is the giving of what is not deserved. Not one of us here today is deserving of God's love. Nothing we have done (and most certainly nothing we can do) can earn us the love of God. John is telling the Jewish people that there is nothing they can do to gain favor and personal relationship with God. There will, however, come a time when this favor and salvation will be freely given and so John prepares the people for the arrival of this message. All his talk of

lifting up every valley, leveling every mountain and straightening every path is not talk about what we must do as part of our repentance, but rather it is talk about what God does in us as a result of our repentance; as a result of our turning toward him and acknowledging our need for him and determining to walk in his way.

The *good news* of our faith; the news that makes our faith so much different than most other faiths in this world is that God reaches out to us. And so through John, God begins to reach out to his people and to prepare their hearts and their minds for the message of Christ. Why is this important? Why does God use John to prepare the people for the message that Christ would bring them? Simply stated, the people, though ready to hear from God were not well equipped to receive the word God was going to send. Mosaic Law governed much of the Jewish heritage surrounding relationship with God and it often involved intercession on their behalf. The message of personal relationship was going to big deal and it was up to John to prepare the way.

The Christian Faith is one in which God calls out to us, calls to us and invites us to be re-united with him. In the prophecy of Isaiah, the words of John the Baptist and in the ministry of the Christ to whom John pointed, God is the one who levels and smoothes the rough road; God is the one who lifts up and makes straight the path. What we are called to do is to repent, to believe and to walk the road that God has prepared for us. I pray with many of you each week that God will make your path clear and that he will direct in the way that you should go according to his will and his way. I don't pray this with you because it is something easy to remember or because it has become some thoughtless words that sound good at the altar. I pray this because, as we see here today, in order to enter into and maintain relationship with our God we must be willing to follow his lead. We cannot follow his lead if the path is not clear and we are unwilling to trust in his direction for our lives.

If God instructs you to walk over and pray with someone close to you and you tell God, no because you're afraid they will think you're crazy; or if God calls you to serve Him in some way and you convince yourself that you're not worthy to carry His word; or if God tells you to turn left and you turn right, then you haven't placed your whole trust in God. Here's the deal folks, we're either in this to win or we're not and if we

aren't willing to listen to the Coach, then we shouldn't be surprised when we miss play or two (can you tell I wrote this while Chris was in his 5th hour or so of College Football?)

And so John calls us to – Repent – The Kingdom of God is at hand. We are called to repent, to believe and to walk the road that God has prepared and is preparing within our lives, within our world; the road that leads us to God and God to us. We are called to walk the specially smoothed road; one that has been lovingly leveled. So what is repentance?

Repentance is a two step process. Moving through the wilderness you can get lost. Walking along; the landscape seemingly familiar and then you stop and realize, “Wait a minute, I’m going in the wrong direction.” As children we used to spend a lot of time playing in the woods and coming to the sudden realization that you have no idea where you are is a terrifying feeling. However, that is not the realization I’m speaking of here. To know that you are going in the wrong direction is very different than being lost. To realize that you are lost can cause you to shut down with crippling fear. To realize that you are traveling in the wrong direction offers you an opportunity to make a course correction. This realization, like the preparation message of John the Baptist, is step one. To simply realize that you are going the wrong way does not get you home. You must deal with the problem. You must change direction. This, like the *good news* message of John which we will look at next week, is step 2.

To repent, we have to change direction, and all the thinking, wishing, praying and resolving in the world in the absence of action will not create repentance. You actually have to turn around and go down the road. Repentance is more than a feeling. It is a kind of confession coupled with a kind of action (a change in direction). When we decide to go in the way God calls us to go and then do it, then God takes care of the rest. God prepares the road for us and leads us on the path He would have us to go; one according to His will and His way for our lives.

Repentance involves acknowledging that we have been our own Lord, or that we have allowed other lords, other powers, to control our lives.

Repentance, then, involves putting those powers behind us and "submitting" to the Lordship of Christ Jesus, of God. The change from one road to another, the turning around of repentance is actually that of allowing God into our lives to take over; of allowing God to set our agenda and then following it.

John the Baptist's message is a message of grace. The transformation of our lives is not something we do; it is something that God does for us as we walk the road God has prepared for us. All we are called to do by John is to confess our need for God, to acknowledge that there are areas in our lives where we are on the wrong path, to turn with new awareness to God and to begin to walk the path he sets before us.

John wants us all to come and swim in the pool of God's forgiveness. The message of John prepares us to be immersed in the grace of God and to walk the road that God has set before us. If these images are unfamiliar to you today, then I urge you to look for God's presence in your life, to listen for His commands and to seek to do as He asks you to do today; for Him, for yourself, for your brothers and sisters and for your world.

As we walk the road of the Lord, know that he is faithful to fill in the valleys, to level every mountain, to make the crooked paths straight and to smooth the ways that are rough. As we walk toward God, know that God is faithful to greet us, to walk towards us, to give us the hope, peace, love and joy that are spoken of each year during the season of advent. God wants us to be in a loving relationship with him, a healing relationship with him, a good relationship with him.

In fact God wants that so much, that God gave freely gave Himself to us through His Son Jesus. In the child born in Bethlehem, in Jesus, God came to live with us and to establish peace between us. Repent, change direction, turn towards God, and enter into the joyful reunion that the Lord has planned for you. As we sing our sermon hymn today, Oh Crimson Flow, take this opportunity to act on the realization that God has placed in your heart. If you are going in the wrong direction today then know that you are not lost, you simply are in need of turning around. Won't you turn around, turn to God this morning. You are welcome to come forward as you are led for prayer during the Sermon Hymn this morning. Glory be to his name, now and forevermore. Amen.