

December 12, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray,

God, whose love is like the sun warming me from the inside, if you are my home, then your word is the street light guiding me there. So I want you to know — I am walking your way, we are walking your way, and we are looking for a light. And our feet are dirty — we've lost our way a time or two. And our bags are heavy — we're carrying an array of grief and fear on our backs. But we're on our way. We're looking for your light. We're listening for your word. When you see us coming, when you feel our hearts move, we hope you'll run down the driveway and catch us. Leave the light on. We are on our way home.

Gratefully we pray, amen

Our scripture for this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 3, verses 1-18. Listen now for the word of the lord.

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.’” **7** John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. **9** Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” **10** And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” **11** In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” **12** Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” **13** He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” **14** Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” **15** As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, **16** John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Last week we left with the image of old Zechariah, finally holding his newborn baby son in his arms. A child he had waited for his whole life long. And as he held his son in his arms he sang a hymn of praise to God and sang of his son's future as the one would prepare the way for the Lord.

Our scripture for this morning introduces us to Zechariah's son - John, as he is beginning his ministry doing just that: preparing the way for the Lord.

We're probably all quite familiar with Zechariah's son, John the Baptist. He comes up a lot this time of the year, and he's a pretty interesting guy.

Matthew and Mark describe John wearing clothing made of camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist. And say that he ate locusts and wild honey.

This definitely was not the norm of Judean society at the time.

I've always liked John the Baptist - probably initially because he seemed like an odd guy and I like odd characters, and he spent a lot of time in the wilderness - and as our scripture today states specifically that the word of God came to John in the Wilderness, and I like to spend a lot of time in the wilderness and it's where I often feel God's presence most strongly.

But as I've continued to come back time and time again to the story of John the Baptist - I've come to see him beyond that - and have been more drawn to him simply because he is quite remarkable, and his story, his role in the gospel is more remarkable still.

As we know, John is the one God chose to prepare the way for the Lord.

To let the people know something new is coming - unlike anything they would expect - unlike anything they would have ever see before. And they must prepare.

I think it says a lot about God, about Christ, about Christianity - that the way to Christ is prepared by a guy who wears camels hair and eat honey and bugs and live in the woods.

I cannot stress this enough - this was not normal. You would perhaps think the one who would prepare the way to Christ would be more dignified and reflect in himself the regal glory of the messiah that is about to come.

The messiah they want. But no - just a weird guy in the woods. And here we see what God is up to. It really speaks for itself about what is to come - for surely what is to come will be unlike anything they would ever expect because they would not expect someone like John the Baptist to prepare the way for the glorious messiah, the king of the jews, the one to restore the monarchy and save Israel.

This king, this messiah - will not be the king they expect. John goes about his ministry by preaching repentance: in order to prepare for Christ, John says we must repent.

It's really not a message you want to hear on the third Sunday of advent where we focus on Joy.

It doesn't seem joyful to be in that crowd and hear John the Baptist call you part of the brood of vipers. But John is steadfast in his message: to prepare for the coming of christ we must repent.

Repentance is one of those things we really don't like to hear. We know it's part of our faith, part of the gospels - yet it's not reflected in our liturgy.

We pray and confess our sins silently but together. We state our forgiveness together, but do we repent? Repentance in the Gospels can be translated literally as to change one's mind - to turn. It requires action.

We must change our minds and turn away from societal systems and structure of power and greed that lead us astray from God's love and justice and turn back to God.

The task of repentance feels daunting.

The sins and corruption and evil that unleashes havoc in the world feels too much to face - so much that we're left feel defeated and have no idea how to even practice our own individual repentance in such a world - for what difference will it make?

Like climate change - we know the danger, we know how rapidly it's killing our earth - yet the task to fix it seems so overwhelming what we - those of us who aren't scientists or government officials - those of us with seemingly no power - what are we to do about it?

What are we, those us who aren't in positions of power - who don't have platforms to make systemic and huge change to bring about a more equitable and just world that reflects the kingdom of God - we are we to do about repentance?

How do each of us repent? What should we do? John gives us answer.

Three times this question is asked to John after he preaches the need for repentance. And three times he gives an answer.

The crowd asks what should we do - John answers - if you have 2 coats, share with someone who has none. The same with food.

The tax collectors ask what should we do - John answers - don't collect more than the amount prescribed to you - don't use your position to steal people's money.

The soldiers ask John what should we do - John answers - be satisfied with what you earn - don't use your position of power to threaten people to get their money.

Three different answers because we all are different - we have different jobs, different wealth, different privileges, different troubles - and so John gives each attainable answers

rooted in everyday life.

And they all seek to provide those with less than we have - to treat people with fairness and respect - and to do justice - to not allow people with less to be taken advantage of by those in positions of power.

This is repentance. To make choices in the everydayness of our lives that strives for equity and thus builds a home for all - where all are treated in respect, where human life is valued, where those with the power to protect protect those who cannot.

For surely this is joy. To repent and help build this home - truly a home where God can reside.

John preaches harsh words that sting and perhaps make us afraid - but John the Baptist makes it clear: we cannot get to the manger to welcome the birth of Christ without wandering into the wilderness - to ask ourselves 'what should we do?'

So Yes, John the baptist was a weird guy. But isn't it remarkable that despite that, despite his appearance and eating habits and choice of home - people came to HIM out in the wilderness to hear him preach repentance.

He did not beg them. He did not force them. They left the comfort of the city to journey out into the uncomfortable - why?

Because a message of repentance is a message of Joy. Repentance allows us all to help build a home for all.

Despite how lost and overwhelming the world may feel, John the Baptist shows us a clear and attainable path that leads us to the coming of Christ - both in the manger, and in the coming of God's Kingdom which is both near and not yet.

Where God's love, mercy, and justice prevails over a world hungry for power and greed.

Let us walk the path in Joy - for Christ is near - and he is bringing something new, and unexpected. So we must be ready.

Thanks be to God. Amen.