

Out of the four gospels, Luke operates the most like a historian. He often “situates his characters in the larger historical framework and narrative of the Roman world. While the details from Luke’s history are far from precise, factual accuracy is not his concern. Rather, Luke is making a confession of faith: the events he narrates, though apparently small on the world stage- the birth of a son to a priest and his barren wife, the fortunes of a pregnant young woman and her fiancé- are of global significance” (David Lose, workingpreacher.org). It’s easy to miss it. Usually I snooze on past a list of names at the beginning of a chapter but here in Luke’s Gospel, I bid you to pay close attention to not only the names listed but also to John the Baptist’s location. While Luke doesn’t offer quite the details of John’s appearance or diet as do other gospel writers (Matthew and Mark), he does see John as perhaps the last representative of the Old Testament prophets, especially when after the long list of names, Luke says, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah” (v. 2b). This may not sound like a big deal, but for 400 years, there had been no prophet of God in Israel. “In this way, John serves as the hinge in history, drawing to a close the age of the law and the prophets and inaugurating the age of redemption when, in the words of John’s spirit-filled father, ‘by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace’ (Luke 1:78-79)” (Lose). Before we read God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in Luke 3:1-18. **READ.**

Did you listen or snooze by those seven names Luke listed? They are the seven names of an emperor, a governor, three of four tetrarchs, and two high priests, representing rulers of the known world, the regional land-rulers of the religious, political and economic complex that stands at the heart of Jerusalem. Collectively, they hold all the authority and might that wealth, military prowess, or ancestry can command. God makes good on his promise and sends the Messiah into the muck of this world in order to save it. Luke doesn't name these seven in power "merely to set the stage for John's appearance, but rather to throw in sharp relief the forces that will oppose him and the one he foretells" (Lose). Luke wants us to know that the word of God comes in the midst of the messy reality of a world defined by both political and religious powers to this lone voice, of a sort of nobody- crying out down on the banks of the Jordan river: Brood of vipers, I mean friends, prepare the way for the Lord! Repent! Like a two-edged sword, the word of God comes to John, not the seven named who are in power, dividing religion and politics, and speaking directly to a wounded world (Karl Jacobson, workingpreacher.org).

This image of dusty prophet, tracking through the wilderness, recalls the exodus and wilderness journeys of Israel, it recalls the formation of God's covenant people, *it implies a return to God*. John the Baptist speaks from a wilderness place much like from where God delivers God's people. And he proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Like real estate and bus stops, location matters, especially in the context of Scripture. Just to be clear, "The wilderness is a place of parched solitude,

endless spaces, where no one feels at home. Yet, wilderness can also be “a refuge where you can hide from your enemies and the evils of the ‘civilized’ world. Mostly, it is a raw and unknowable place of encounter where we come face-to-face with ourselves, our environment, and our horrors, hallucinations, hungers, and hopes. We find ourselves- and God- *in the wilderness*” (Diana Butler Bass, e-newsletter, *The Cottage*). And it’s precisely in the wilderness- “an environment so far removed from power as to make power laughable- that the word of God comes” (Debie Thomas, www.journeywithjesus.net). Like it or not, “the wilderness is a place that lays us bare. A place where life is raw and risky, and our illusions of self-sufficiency fall apart. There’s something though about the wilderness that brings us to our knees and softens us towards repentance. Yes, ‘sin’ and ‘repentance’ are loaded words. Many of us are wary of them, for good reasons. They are words which have been weaponized to frighten or diminish us. They are words that have been deployed in very narrow ways to pit us against each other, politically, economically, culturally” (Thomas).

But here’s the thing: Advent begins with an honest, wilderness-style reckoning with sin. “We can’t get to the manger unless we go through John, and John is all about repentance” (Thomas). When you repent, you turn around, change directions, choose a different path, and make a radical rupture. Repentance signals an abrupt end to life on auto-pilot or business as usual” (Dan Clendenin, journeywithjesus.net). **So from what do you need to repent in order to prepare the way for new beginnings- new life?** John’s proclamation is more than a call to repentance in some sort of

righteous indignation or as a self-improvement guru. We do him a disservice when that is all we think he is: a backwater, *fire, and brimstone* preacher. God chose John the baptizer, not the seven powerful mentioned, to help prepare the way for Jesus' coming into the world. As one scholar put it this is another example of how "God desires the end of hierarchies of status, power, and wealth- the chief source of human suffering throughout the scriptures. We know because these words are echoed by both the OT and NT prophets: *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...* That's not an infrastructure program. That's a promise of equity and equality- no more domination of one group over another. John insists that righteousness will level all suffering and oppression-that *the entirety of creation will see the healing and liberation of God*" (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage*). As Pastor Trevor preached last week; we live in the already but not yet. Knowing the future makes the fullness of the present possible and this is the true essence of Advent.

And this is why we must pay attention to John's proclamation of good news to repent, to turn back to a God that draws near, to turn back to the One who has the Holy Spirit upon him, to turn back to the One who can deliver people in ways that John confesses he is not powerful enough or worthy enough to do himself. **And neither are we.** John's fiery proclamation creates a moment of truth then and now- all bets are off, all devices for maintaining an illusion have to be abandoned. "With his Advent announcement, John urges us to spurn anything and everything that

hinders ultimate allegiance to Jesus” (Clendenin). Sin, both personal and corporate, is a problem. Sin matters to God, a lot, and it should matter to us. And the human responsibility to repent is not urged so that the kingdom will come- but because the kingdom is coming (the already, not yet). To prepare to receive Christ into our hearts and lives, we must first admit we need him and then confess our sins. Sin is a condition – not simply just a series of misdeeds; it is not just what we do, **but something that we are in**. It is a force sometimes that grips us beyond the sovereignty of our wills. It is something *we must be delivered from*. Some of us were taught that sin is ‘breaking God’s laws’ or ‘missing the mark,’ as an archer misses his target. Or ‘committing moral acts.’ As one writer so beautifully puts it: “While these definitions aren’t wrong, they assume that sin is a problem primarily because it angers God. But God’s temper is not what’s at stake. Sin is a problem because it kills us. Why? Because sin is a refusal to become fully human. It’s anything that interferes with the opening up of our whole hearts to God, to others, to creation, and to ourselves. Sin is estrangement, disconnection, disharmony. It’s the slow accumulation of dust choking the soul. It’s the sludge that slows us down, that says, ‘Quit, stop trying, give up, change is impossible.’ Sin is apathy, Care-less-ness. A frightened existence to an engaged life. Sin is the opposite of creativity, the opposite of abundance, the opposite of flourishing. It is a walking death” (Debie Thomas, 12/2/18 journeywithjesus.net).

Either way, through our personal misdeeds or our sin condition, we are condemned, or so we think. Our conscience condemns. The world

condemns. We too often condemn one another. The evil one, the liar and deceiver, condemns. But not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit **convicts** – and therein lies all the difference. In condemnation there is no salvation, no hope. **But in conviction**, there is a chance, an opportunity, a possibility of a turning point. This is the good news! The conviction of the Holy Spirit affirms truth- the truth about God and the truth about us. The Holy Spirit says, come on, turn around, come with me- live! To repent is to be convicted- it is to turn around, to change direction, to surrender your sin to Christ and claim His power and love over your life instead. The word translated forgiveness in this text comes from the Greek word which means “to let go” or “to loose.” Only God has ultimate authority to let go our sins.

And “unless we’re in the wilderness, it’s hard to see our own privilege, and even harder to imagine giving it up. No one standing on a mountaintop wants the mountain to be flattened” (Thomas). And so I ask you, **“Where is God leveling the ground you stand on?” What will it take for you to participate in this uncomfortable but essential work?”** This Advent, I invite you to think about where you are located and to think about your sin. Examine it, take it out from your memory bank and look at it closely, scrutinize it against the truth and love of the Holy Spirit. Hold it out and search it against the inner yearnings of your heart, and then confess it out loud before God and put it behind you, and **repent! and then be done with it.** And understand that the release or forgiveness that follows repentance *does not undo past sins*, but it does **unbind** people from them. It will unbind you. We cannot undo the past but through repentance the past can no

longer have power over us. As singer and theologian, Jellyroll, states- "The windshield is bigger than the rearview mirror for a reason because what's in front of you is so much more important than what's behind you."

Repentance is about freeing yourself from holding on to all your stuff- all the stuff in your life that keeps you from any kind of restoration with God and others. BUT it's too difficult to hold onto our stuff with one hand and reach for Jesus with the other (Nadia Bolz Weber, sermon). **Repentance is about real, honest change** which leads to a peace that passes all understanding. We prepare the way to Bethlehem when we pour out the shame we have been hiding in ourselves to the One alone with the power of Spirit to restore us- to bring us to wholeness. And that requires us to stop being the moral monitors of other's heart *and to look honestly into our own wilderness* and reconcile with those whom we have hurt or whom have hurt us. Repentance is good news because it reveals a new path- a path toward peace- a way back to God, to others...and yes mercifully...to ourselves. In Jesus Christ, **God has let go of your sins, have you?** Repent! Turn around and receive the good news in Jesus Christ! The finger John the Baptist is pointing is NOT at you. He points to Christ- the One who is leveling the mountains and raising up the valleys so that all can walk on holy, level, common ground. Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord! Amen.