

***An Unlikely Path to Peace***  
***Luke 3:1-6***  
***December 9, 2018***

The favourite question we will get from people over the next couple of weeks goes like this:

*are you ready for Christmas, or perhaps more likely, are you ready for the holidays?*

People want to know if you have bought all your presents, got your menu down pat for the family gatherings, and cleaned up the house in readiness for the visitors. So when I suggest we go to John the Baptist to help us on this question you are entitled to wonder: what on earth has John the Baptist got to do with Christmas and the holidays?

I read Tony Robinson's blog this week and found him refreshingly honest about this Advent Season. He admits Advent usually finds him in a kind of funk. He struggles every year with Advent's cast of characters with its wild apocalyptic language and images. Get John the Baptist out of here and bring on the shepherds! Part of the problem, Tony thinks, is the domestication of the Gospel in the church today. We want everything to be sweetness and light, just like the shops in the mall. But, Tony confesses, it's really not like that in our world, even here in North America. Perhaps, Tony suggests, if we were a prisoner in a Soviet jail, or a black person in the West side of Chicago, or a homeless victim of abuse in the ghetto of the Bronx, perhaps John the Baptist's Advent message of a returning judge is just what the doctor ordered. He concludes:

*The coming of Christ is shorn of all need for repentance and transformation of life. Instead of being captives to a culture that is deeply disturbed and destructive — from which the church needs to be ransomed and set free — we become a church trying to keep pace with culture's many "magic of Christmas" productions.*

Luke wants us to know that John began his ministry during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius was the adopted son of Emperor Augustus and ruled from 14 to 37 AD. Tiberius was a melancholy man who seems to have lived a pretty unhappy life. After the death of

his son Drusus he abandoned Rome and went into exile and lived out his life on the isle of Capri. Luke tells us that John entered his public ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius' reign, which would have been around 29AD. In other words, during this time of political chaos in Rome John began his preaching in the wilderness of Judea. It was also at that time, Luke informs us, that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He was Rome's representative in Jerusalem.

An ancient stone, found in Palestine in 1961, links these two rulers and how they saw themselves: ***To the Divine Augustus Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea, has dedicated.*** Luke wants us to know that John's ministry is set during the time of these two important political figures of history.

Why does Luke take the trouble to set the story of John and Jesus into their historical setting? Alongside these powerful political figures what significance do the birth and ministry of John have? Jesus and John, in the scheme of things, are totally insignificant! What really does the birth of two small children or the ministry of a wide-eyed, strange prophet, whose territory is the wilderness, have to do with kings, emperors, and governors? Luke's response would be: ***Everything!***

For it was to none of these political elite that God's word came. Rather God's word came to John in the wilderness. Over against these powerful figures that represent the collective power of the world stands this strange preacher/prophet who, armed only with God's word, is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and pointing people to the savior who was soon to come. A word from God did not come to any of the powerful and rich. It came rather to a mere son of Zechariah somewhere out in the wilderness.

How often have we seen this pattern in the biblical story? So many times that it obviously represents God's suspicion of power and preference for the marginalized. It is a theme that the church has often failed to grasp, or at least to live out. In Mary's song Luke tells us that the mighty will be brought down, the rich sent away empty, the humble elevated and the poor eat their fill. God's great reversal will take effect and it begins with John's message of repentance and inner transformation.

Wilderness is not just a place. It is highly symbolic for the Hebrew people. It was in the wilderness that God had shaped them into a people. It is a place with no maps, where God is the guide by fire and cloud. You may enter it and never be seen again. It is wild, dangerous, and uncharted. And yet this is where the message of John began.

So how does John help us get ready for Christ?

Luke enlarges Mark's quote from Isaiah 40: *The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 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.*

Isaiah speaks of a path being prepared for the Lord's return to Zion. Luke changes Isaiah's, *make straight the paths of the Lord* to read: *make **his** paths straight*. He also modifies the last line from, *and all people shall see it together* to ***all flesh will see the salvation of God***. This fits with the words of Simeon in 2:30-31: *for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples...* God's message of salvation is extended to the entire human family, not simply to the people of Israel.

John's task was to prepare people for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. What did they, including us, have to do to prepare. Not, you understand, get all the gifts under the tree; get the house prepared, or any of our present anxiety about getting ready. Rather John's message to us is that we need to ***repent***.

The Greek word is made up of two words, *nous*-meaning mind, and *meta*-meaning after. Literally, then, *metanoia* means *after mind*, or *second thought*. It means turning, and moving in a new direction. It has very little to do with one's emotions, and everything to do with a change in one's actions. For Luke, the people needed a *turning* from the way of Tiberius, Pilate and Herod's sons. Indeed, John's purpose was to call people to God's new path promised at his birth: *He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God (1:16)*.

And what was John's Christmas homily? Hear his words:

*Bear fruits worthy of repentance...Even now the axe 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.*

We definitely wouldn't want to put that quote on our Christmas mailer? And yet that is the message of John to us at Advent.

What would that mean for the church to repent? Surly at the very least it would mean turning away from our domestication of the gospel. I have to admit that I have deep reservations about the church getting on the bandwagon of society's love of a Charles Dickens's Christmas. I just saw the movie, ***The Man who Invented Christmas***. It's the story of how Dickens really did change England's and later our view of Christmas. Today North America is Dickens's Christmas on steroids. We have adopted the party time atmosphere, with the bright lights and dancing, as well as the sentimentalism that surrounds the story. We love Scrooge's Christmas morning without noticing it came about only after his conversion. Certainly we would hope that hope, peace, joy and love are born in our hearts during the year. But this is not what describes our world. It is the result of Christians' repentance and faith that changes the way we see God, our neighbour, the world and ourselves. Christmas, as John the Baptist will ever remind us, is about repentance, about a coming Jesus who is righteous and who is the bringer of judgment. Advent is the opening of the story of how Jesus came to save us.

That's how we get ready for Christmas. We engage in the work of repentance and following Christ. As *Charles Wesley's* great hymn sings: *Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be.* [L] [SEP] *let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;* [L] [SEP] *Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,* [L] [SEP] *till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.* [L] [SEP]

**Amen**

