

The Proclamation of John the Baptist
Second Sunday of Advent, Year C, December 8, 2024
Luke 3:1-6
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Welcome to worship on this Second Sunday of Advent! In just 15 days we'll celebrate the first Christmas, when Jesus was born in very humble circumstances in a town that is now part of the West Bank in Palestine. But as we've mentioned, Advent actually goes in reverse time. We're nowhere near the birth of a baby yet. Last week, we overheard Jesus teaching about the end time when he would return again. He had entered Jerusalem just prior to his crucifixion in about the year A.D. 33.

This week, we learn from Luke 3:1 that John the Baptizer is appearing "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius," which would set this passage in A.D. 28 or 29. Notice that Luke creates a context for his story in several ways. First, there is information about the political rulers of the day. Luke's report is clearly rooted in secular history. We also hear about the religious leadership, the high priests Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, who would have been in charge at the time of John, though Annas would still have been very influential.

In addition to setting a time frame for John's ministry, Luke also connects him to the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-4. By summoning Isaiah, Luke is linking John to the great prophets of the Old Testament. The fact that "the word of God came to John" (Luke 3:2) is reminiscent of the call stories of the prophets of old, such as Jeremiah (1:1-5), Ezekiel (1:1-3), and Hosea (1:1). Jesus extols John as both a prophet and "more than a prophet" (Matthew 11:9). John is tasked with preparing the way for Jesus, who has not yet begun his public ministry. John does so by leaving the wilderness where he lived and touring the region around the Jordan River. He encouraged people to be baptized for the forgiveness of the sins.

Let's stop here a minute, because we do have to ask just what kind of baptism John is proclaiming. We should not think of this rite as Christian baptism. According to scholar Joel Green, there were two common types of cleansings in Jewish practice (*Connections*, Year C, Vol. 1, page 29). One related to purification rituals (Leviticus 15). The other was the baptism of those outside of the Jewish faith who wanted to convert, though whether baptism was actually performed for this reason at the time of Jesus is uncertain. An important difference to note is that either of these practices entailed people bathing themselves. In contrast, John washed the

candidates who came before him. Another contrast concerns the purpose of these cleansings. Repeatable ritual washings were intended to remove particular impurities. John's baptism, however, was for the forgiveness of sins and occurred only once. This baptism could be considered a "fresh start," allowing one a clean slate. Dr. Green summarizes John's repentance-baptism by writing: "This realignment of heart and lives in relation to God's agenda is the means by which God's people 'prepare the way of the Lord' and 'make his paths straight'" (*Connections*, page 29).

Next week we will explore John's specific message to the crowds who have come and gathered around him (3:7-18), but for today we're going to see how he is connected to Isaiah's prophecy and what it means to prepare the way of the Lord. As we do, think about how you might have heard John had you been there and what questions you might have asked.

We begin as Luke shifts Isaiah's meaning about the voice. In Isaiah, the voice itself "cries out," and it directs listeners to prepare a way "in the wilderness" (40:3). In Luke, however, the voice is located in the wilderness, which is far more appropriate for John. Although Luke does not describe John, Matthew portrays him in terms that reflect the prophet Elijah, who appears with camel hair clothing and a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:4). John's diet consists of locusts and honey, which he ate either because of his scrupulous adherence to Jewish purity laws, or because he was devoted to God's service. Either way, we know that he spent a lot of time in the Judean wilderness and, as such, could have been influenced by strict practices of the monastics of the Essene community. Whether John was an Essene himself is debatable.

What we do know is that John's message, at least as Luke understood it, must have stirred people's imaginations. God is again speaking through a prophet in the wilderness, thus recalling the years of the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses. The voice calls people to "prepare," and as it was with those in John's day, it is again in ours. We are being called to prepare to welcome Jesus into our hearts. Before that can happen, a road project will change the shape of the landscape. What is high will be brought low, and what is low will be raised up, thus making the road smooth. Perhaps most astonishing we read in verse 5 that "all people shall see it (the glory of the LORD) together." Everyone is included!

Well, that really brings us up short, doesn't it? But perhaps it shouldn't. Even before John was born, all of this was known. Promises made long ago to Abraham are being fulfilled. The prophecy of Malachi (3:1-4), likely written in the early 5th century B.C., points centuries ahead to a messenger who will prepare the way. We Christians believe that messenger to be

John, who we refer to as the Baptist (or Baptizer). In Luke 1:68-79 we read words of prophecy spoken by John's father, the priest Zechariah. It is clear in that passage that John is to "be called the prophet of the Most High" and as such, he "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins" (1:76-77). And these people include "those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (1:79). These words may hint at the opportunity for the salvation for all people that becomes very apparent as we move through Luke's Gospel. John has come with a clear mission. As he calls people to repentance and baptizes them for the forgiveness of sin, he is fulfilling the words of the prophets Isaiah and Malachi, as well as the prophecy of his own father. Infused with the Holy Spirit even before his birth, John is aware of who he is and what he is supposed to do.

We can give thanks for John, but where are we in all of this? I haven't seen any wandering prophets emerge from the wilderness lately. But I have heard people calling me—and you—to repentance. But what does that actually mean? This is not a matter of saying, "I'm sorry; I won't do that again." To repent means to turn toward God and reorient one's life according to God's will and ways. And it's not a "one and done" kind of response. In his Sermon 14: "Repentance of Believers" (which you can find on the Internet), John Wesley reminds us that we are called to repent throughout our lives. Perhaps there is something at this moment that you want to repent of. Do that, knowing that God will forgive you and that you can reorient your life now and whenever else you may stumble.

What are some of the ways in which our lives can reflect this reorientation? Perhaps we can glean many ideas by examining the fruit of the Spirit, which Paul writes about in Galatians 5:22-23: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Think for a moment what our world would be like if we showed **love** for all people. The apostle uses the Greek word *agape* here, which is God's self-giving love. Recall that Jesus' teaching on the Great Commandment, which calls us to love both God and our neighbor. Lives would surely be reoriented if people loved God and loved others the way God loves them.

And how might repentance cause us to reorient our lives in **joy**? Unlike happiness, which is fleeting because it depends on our current circumstances, joy is a gift of the Spirit that is deeply rooted within us. The Greek here is the root word for Eucharist (Holy Communion).

When we think of **peace**, we often are simply satisfied with the absence of war or other conflict. But the peace of the Bible, the Hebrew *shalom*, includes not only the absence of turmoil but also the presence of

wholeness, harmony, completeness, prosperity, welfare, and tranquility.

Patience. Now we're getting to a real challenge, especially since we've become so accustomed to the speed of technology. A survey of 2000 British adults revealed that although 95% of them consider patience a virtue, a wide variety of scenarios try their patience in just seconds. For example, people become impatient after 16 seconds of waiting for a web page to load; 25 seconds of waiting for a traffic light to change; waiting 28 seconds for a cup of tea water to boil. They would leave a restaurant if food didn't arrive in 14 minutes (<https://studyfinds.org/hurry-up-modern-patience-thresholds-lower-than-ever-before-survey-finds/>).

Kindness, including small random acts, seems so basic and yet appears to be in such short supply. People who are kind exhibit traits of selflessness, compassion, and mercy, just as Jesus did. Kindness is so easy to practice and it costs nothing.

Many of us can afford to be **generous** with our money and possessions. But that's only part of the equation. All of us can have generous spirits that welcome and affirm other people. We can live as disciples who are open to all people.

As **faithful** disciples of Jesus Christ, our lives are to reflect his life. Just saying that we believe in him, or relying on our church membership or attendance is really not enough. Our faithfulness has to be lived out each day. As we go about our daily routines, we need to keep asking ourselves if what we are doing and the way we are treating other people would be pleasing to Jesus.

Gentleness is the eighth fruit of the Spirit. Some people are soft-spoken, whereas others are loud and boisterous, sometimes creating confusion and fear in those around them. The gentle person warmly reaches out and shows care and respect for others.

The final fruit that Paul lists is **self-control**. This fruit requires us to exercise self-discipline. For example, self-control encompasses how we marshal our resources. Some folks just can't resist spending more than they can reasonably afford, or eating more than they know is healthy for them. Perhaps an even more difficult challenge for us is choosing to give up trying to control things on our own. We need to turn over our lives to God, who will lead us on the path we should go, if we'll only obey.

If we could just memorize and practice these two verses from Galatians 5—just two out of the 31,102 verses that are in the entire Bible!—imagine how our relationship with God and with our neighbors could be radically transformed. We wouldn't need to find a prophet in the wilderness to reorient our lives toward God. We could repent on our own concerning the

times when we have failed to allow the fruit of the Spirit to manifest themselves in our lives. And we could apologize to those we have offended or harmed when we have failed to be loving, peaceful, kind and so on. In doing so, we would be prepared, as John calls us to be, for the arrival of the One who is to come bringing that salvation to all. We sometimes say, “the proof is in the pudding.” In the case of repentance, where John’s water baptism is but a sign, the proof is in the fruit of a life lived according to God’s standards.

So, what are we waiting for? Some might argue that life is too difficult to make any changes right now. We’ve just come through a divisive election where the winner garnered 49.6% of the popular vote and the loser, 48.3%. Hardly a mandate, which makes me think the divisiveness will continue, perhaps even worsen. Maybe we just need to hold off on any major changes until the world improves. Well no, not really. Look again at the beginning of today’s reading from Luke. The political situation is not at all good here. There’s a list of oppressive Roman government officials, the same ones that the Israelites hope a warrior king like David will come in and get rid of for them. Friends, there is never a perfect time to make changes. The Apostle Paul reminds us, “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). It’s time for us as Christians to act!

I truly believe that this One who John the Baptist calls us to prepare for will be the One who will show us the way to the Father, the One who will help us to reorient our lives so that we can live faithfully. So, in this season of Advent, this time of preparation, do whatever you feel led to do to reorient your life toward God the Father, toward the Son Jesus who has come in the flesh to save us, and toward the Holy Spirit who empowers us to bear fruit worthy of repentance.

We may not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds that future. Let’s challenge ourselves to get our road graders and earthmovers ready right now to fill those valleys, to level those mountains, and to make those highways smooth and straight. The King is coming and we need to be prepared to meet him!

Love, Nan