

Repent: Turn around – Change Direction!

Luke 3;1-6

I can still remember the first football game at our new high school in Prairie View, now Lincolnshire in 1965. Our school district was split in two and our township built a brand new high school. It was our first game and our cheerleaders were very excited and very nervous. The band picked up, the energy of the crowd erupted – and immediately the ball began to move rapidly down field. With anticipation the cheerleaders began to cheer loudly and boldly – TOUCHDOWN – TOUCHDOWN – WE WANT A TOUCHDOWN! Voices screaming, arms pumping, legs jumping. The cheerleaders were really doing their thing! Except that – something was wrong. The crowd was not responding – but the one across the field was. The cheerleaders turned AROUND and looked at the field – and almost fainted. Yes, the ball was moving down the field – but in the wrong direction.

You see, the other team had the ball – and in the cheerleaders misguided enthusiasm, they had just cheered our rivals on to a touchdown.

Today, John the Baptist stands before us – bold, loud, and energetic. But before he cheers us enthusiastically down the field, he asks us to look at our spiritual compass to check the direction of our lives.

He implores us to make sure we know where we are headed – that we are clear about which direction we are carrying the message of our lives. He assures us that it is not too late to repent – to literally turn around. No, it's not too late to change the direction of our lives – so that we won't miss the New Life that God is promising to bring our way.

We know that during this season of Advent, this season of New Creation, we are called to wait, to watch, to pray, to expect. But, we are also called to participate in God's Advent. To participate by preparing ourselves through repentance.

All four Gospels focus us to deal with this bristly John the Baptist – always in early December – when the rest of the world is wrapped in soft, sweet, celebration, John comes to us in the glare of biblical truth to confront us, to afflict us, to discomfort us – to remind us that most of our preparations for Christmas don't prepare us for Christ at all.

Luke's version of the John story begins in the immediacy of history. It begins right where we are: in the second year of Donald Trump's presidency, when Bruce Rauner serves as Governor of Illinois, and Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth serve in the Senate, when Wayne Miller is the Bishop of the Chicago Metropolitan Synod. In the year 2018 the word of God comes to John the Baptist – and through John, the word comes to us, to Gary Smith and Paul and Karen Speidel, to Chuck Wille, to all of you and to me – the Word comes to all of us in the wilderness.

Prepare a way for the Lord. Examine your life – examine your priorities, your values, and your behavior. Check out your emotional and spiritual life. Are you headed in the right direction? Are you headed in the direction of God? And if not, then repent. Turn around. Change direction.

Is your health unhealthy, your blood pressure too high, your cholesterol too rich, you weight too much? Well then Repent. Turn around. Change direction. How is your family life? Is it balanced, honest, open, connected? Or is it stressed, precarious, lonely, brittle, broken? Then repent. Turn around. Change direction. What about your work – whether volunteer or paid – is your work rewarding, creative, compassionate – or is it tedious, overwhelming, demanding, disconnected from your vision and your dreams, an unsatisfying use of your gifts and energy? Then repent. Turn around. Change direction. And what about your faith? Is it vital, growing, healing, and serving? Or is it small, tired, tepid, and dull? Well then, repent. Turn around. Change direction.

If we want God to come warmly, humanly, simply into our lives, then we need to get ready. We need to prepare. We need to repent. We need to change. Yes, today John speaks uncomfortable words to us - in a season when we yearn to be comfortable.

There is great tension these days within the Christian world about many things – but nothing is more troubling than the theological tension between grace and law, between acceptance and judgment, between God as lover and God as judge. In other words how can judgment and grace co-exist in the same place? It was - and is - a very good question. And it underlies the discomfort we all have with these John the Baptist stories. If God comes freely and graciously for all of us in the full humanity of Jesus - if God is born in us whether we deserve it or not – how come we have to DO something in order to receive it? How come we have to repent in order to be forgiven? How come we have to change in order to receive God?

What right does John – or anyone – have to judge us, to criticize us, to assume that we aren't okay just the way we are?

Well, the answer is, John shouldn't – and he doesn't. Today the words of John the Baptist – words crying in the wilderness of humanity – are not words of criticism. They are words of choice. John is not judging our worth. He is inviting our wholeness. He is not criticizing our past. He is offering our future. The free and lavish grace of God comes to us in our sinfulness and offers us wholeness and peace and that is what compels us to want to change, to want to repent, to want to turn around and change direction. John does not judge us. We are not to judge each other. But we must judge ourselves - we must face the truth of who we are and claim the hope of who we want to become.

What is that you say? It's too hard, you've tried, you can't do it? Well you know what? I've tried, it is too hard. I can't do it either! That is I can not do it alone. I need help and so do you.

And that's where the Good News comes in. We don't have to do it alone. There is help. We have a Savior who is already here. A Savior who is present with us in Word and Sacrament. A Savior who is present with us every day, every hour. And through the power of this Word and Sacrament Christ is present to help us be the people he wants us to be. God re-creates us in holy image. This is the work of ADVENT. This is the work of preparation. This is the work of repentance. This is the work of turning around to face the direction of God. And the result? Freedom and abundant life.

There is a medieval legend about a man who was depraved and irresponsible in many ways but who had enough grace in him to want to be good. He went to a costume maker who gave him a costume to wear - complete with a halo wired to his head. As the man walked down the street he was tempted to act and re-act in his normal shiftless way - but then he remembered the halo on his head. So he decided to act differently. He gave money to a beggar on the street. He treated his wife well. He refused to cut corners at work.

Eventually he returned the halo costume - but as he was leaving the costume shop he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror – and he saw a permanent halo glowing above his head! It seems that he had become what he did - that by turning around he had found a permanent new direction for his life.

That's what Martin Luther calls remembering our Baptism. Through our Baptism we receive a halo that is permanently attached to our soul.

But Luther says we need to be about the business of remembering our Baptism - we need to remember the water that was poured over our heads, we need to remember the cross that was traced over our foreheads, and that makes us remember that we belong to God and when we remember that we belong to God we also remember that God is with us to help us be God's people.

Somehow, when I think of Advent, of repentance, of preparation, I don't have visions of arid deserts and wild prophets. I think instead of the good people here at Good Shepherd and how it is you serve the Lord so beautifully in this place as you reflect the light of Christ in all you do and say.

Our lives are defined by reflecting the light of Christ in the world. But in this life we always need to turn around and turn our faces toward the light of Advent - the Light of the World. Let us reflect that light and let us shine!!
Shine! Shine!