

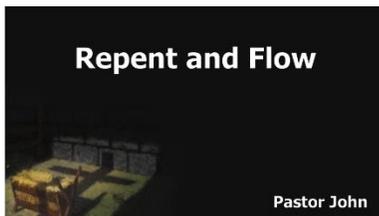
**Repent and Follow**

LOVE

December 9, 2018

**Luke 3: 1-6**

*<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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; <sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"*



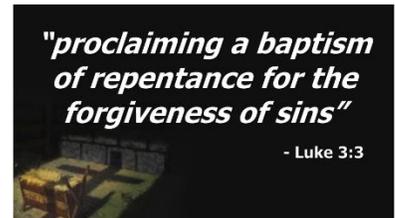
Last week we began our Advent sermon series with a look at the promise of new life. Jesus' parable of the fig tree encouraged us to be looking for signs of new life.

Paul's passage from Romans 8 reminded us that just as we are longing for new life, so too is all of creation groaning for new life. Today we begin to transition towards the event that we will celebrate on December 24<sup>th</sup>. In our passage today, we hear the call of the voice in the wilderness. John's voice beckons us to prepare ourselves for the coming of the one who will bring salvation to all people. John came before Jesus and helped people to get themselves ready for the coming Messiah. John called for repentance. Jesus calls us to follow. Let us pray...

John the Baptist is part of our story of expectancy. Part of John's message heralds the coming Messiah as he shouts, "*Prepare the way of the Lord*". In the season of Advent, being prepared to welcome Jesus on Christmas Eve and to be prepared for the second coming of Christ should it come suddenly are part of what we ponder and consider. Both of these "arrivals" are things that we celebrate during the season of Advent.

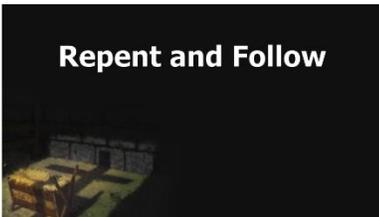
Our passage today begins by setting the time and place in history. Luke begins with a list of the political leaders and the areas that they ruled over, followed by identifying the high priests – the religious leaders of the Jewish community – as well. It was during the time of these leaders that the Word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah. This pattern of establishing who was ruling when the word of God arrived is found in many of the Old Testament books as well. It sets the historical time period for the book. Isaiah begins this way. Jeremiah begins this way. Ezekiel and Hosea and Amos and many other prophetic books of the Old Testament this way. Just as all these Old Testament prophets were called by God to bring His word to the people of God, John too was chosen by God to bring the word to the people of Israel. In almost all of the prophetic appearances we find in the Bible, the role of the prophet was to call the people back to God. Sin had entered the communal life of the people and they needed to hear God's voice of correction and instruction to return them to faithful living. This is the role that John was called to during the reign of Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Annas and Caiaphas in the regions of Judea and Galilee.

John's base of ministry was the wilderness area around the Jordan River. He came to this area, *"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"*. John came offering baptism to and for the people. Symbolically, when one was baptized they were immersed in the water and their sin



would be washed away. In Judaism, the covering over by the water also symbolized the earth closing over the grave. This represented closing over the old self as one chose to die to the sins of their old life. To receive this baptism, in order to find new life, one would first have to repent of one's sins. I do not know about you, but for me, this process can take a bit of time when it is a big sin or when it is a sin that I have been struggling with for a long time. I have to get to the point where I sense a need for forgiveness. At our Tuesday morning group, one of the men identified this as reaching the point where we are willing to admit we need help. This is true of our sin as well. This recognition usually comes right after the moment of final conviction from the Holy Spirit. I think this is true for many Christians. We begin to realize that something we are doing is really sin. We realize that we need help. We finally come to the place where we know that we have to force that part of us to die so that we do not continue to live in sin. We repent, and we turn to God.

### Repent and Follow



John the Baptist understood that this was a process for the folks that came out into the wilderness to see him.

Some, particularly the religious leaders, came out of curiosity. Just what was happening out there in the wilderness? But most came with a sense of change needed in their lives. I'm sure there were some that heard the call to repentance and responded right away. Conviction struck deep

in their hearts and into the water they would plunge. Their response to the word of God that John was speaking into their lives was powerful and at once they surrendered. They would be baptized the moment after they repented. But John knew that for most people there was a need for some "in between" time. They needed time to comprehend their wrongdoing, to see the condition of their souls, to sit with the regret or shame that they were feeling, to acknowledge the damage caused by their sins and the impact of things left undone or unsaid. John's basic message was the same as it was for all of the Old Testament prophets: listen here people - repent of your sins. John knew that repentance is the necessary first step to receiving forgiveness. There is no forgiveness without repentance.

The space in between realizing that we have sin in our life and the space where we come to the realization that we need to repent can be a hard space to walk through, to navigate. In one of the books that I was reading to prepare for today's message, the author talked about how hard this idea is for some people to hear. It is difficult to look within, to search the condition of one's soul. Some people come to church just hoping to hear a nice message that makes them feel good, to sing some songs that lift their spirits, to say a prayer or partake in a sacrament, to leave feeling like they did a good thing by coming to church that day. Maybe some people headed out into the wilderness to see John thinking some of these thoughts. Maybe some folks come to our church thinking these same thoughts. Maybe you are here this morning thinking these thoughts.

This man who came to proclaim the coming of the Lord went out into the wilderness and began preaching this baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. John was different. Our Advent study author, Katie Dawson, does a good job explaining this. Dawson noted that John's "very life was reminiscent of the prophets of old". John made the choice to "intentionally separate himself from society" and saw the wilderness as the place to connect to God. He let go of the expectations of his day to reach his audience. In many ways, John echoed both Jesus' humble birth and the lifestyle that Jesus would live – turning upside down the Jews' understanding of God's love. The fact that John was reminiscent of an earlier time, that he stood outside of convention, that he was so different from the other religious leaders of the day attracted many to this voice calling out.

I imagine his audience was quite small to begin with. Just a few curious onlookers at first. But soon enough John began to have followers and news began to spread about this prophet of God preaching a really basic message out there in the wilderness. He was calling people to a holier life, to living a life that was more pleasing to God. John was also calling people to something better. This idea of seeking something better naturally resonates with us. Deep down we all want to be better. Yet this feeling also clashes with our natural bent against change. This feeling really clashes with our inner sense that we are always right and the loathing to admit when we are wrong. We sense this need to change and we are aware that it would be, well, better for us. But there is also this part of us that fights against this. So, I would wager that there were folks who came out to see John and felt the need for change and came a time or two more before finally being willing to enter the waters. I would also wager that there were other folks who came out to hear John, felt that same need to

change - and chose not to come back out into the wilderness. Why am I willing to wager that both of these scenarios are true? Because I have been there. I know people who are there. I'd be just as willing to bet that you have each been there and that you all know people who are there right now. They sense a need to change, they feel that life could be better, but...

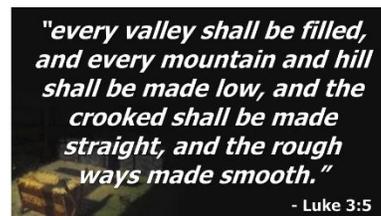
Repentance is also really hard. It requires change. It calls us to see ourselves and our reality differently. It begins with looking within and admitting that there is sin in our lives that needs to be there no more. John was not calling his fellow Jews to something easy. He is not calling us to something easy either. John is inviting us to a journey that has challenge, to a life of sacrifice, to a place of discomfort. John invites us to reset our course and to ask some hard questions. How is the depth of my faith? How is it with my soul? Am I expectant, growing, serving? Or am I small, tired, dull, unresponsive? John speaks uncomfortable words in a season when many want to simply be comfortable and happy. Just as much as John was challenging the status quo of his day, he challenges the status quo of our lives.

Just as John preached and knew, we too know that there is not forgiveness without repentance. Repentance is step one. Repentance is "the no, the stop, the be quiet, the appraisal, the change of direction". Then comes the second reality of repentance and baptism as we once again into find new life: the following. The following is "the yes, the discernment for change, the taking stock of our lives, the heart and compassion that leads to conviction and mission". In our following we claim assurance of forgiveness, pardon, and a new

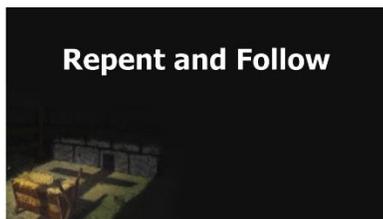
start, and new life. Advent is the space where we pause to repent, to change, to realign our lives, and when we then prepare to follow Jesus Christ.

The promise we receive on this second Sunday in Advent is that God forgives our sins and equips our souls to repent and step into a new life, to find a place to become a part of God's mission. John invites us into this participation – to help *"prepare the way for the Lord"* each in our own way in our own lives. We respond to the call so that the world may see God's salvation. Just as John the Baptist was different in how he separated himself from the things of this world and in how he let go of the expectations of his day and culture, we too are called to be in the world but not of the world. We are called to claim our place in the family of God, to live as His witnesses in the world, to repent and follow the example set by Jesus.

In this season of Advent, we prepare our lives both for the coming in the birth on Christmas Eve and for the coming in the return of Jesus one day, when *"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"*. The valley will be filled, the mountains and hills made low, the crooked path made straight, and the paths made smooth. This will happen so that *"all flesh shall see the salvation of God"*. This day is surely coming. In the book of Revelation, we learn that this will happen so that all can easily come to Jesus. The roadblocks and hazards are removed. The journey is made easy.



If it were only so easy for us, right? Out there in the wilderness, some heard the voice calling out. They felt the call of God upon their lives. They chose to repent and prepare the way for the Lord to enter their lives. This is the call we hear and the choice we are called to as well. May we each be willing. May we



each repent, confess our sins to God, receive forgiveness, and follow Jesus wherever and to whomever He leads. In doing so, may we, like John the Baptist, be that voice that calls out to others, so that they too will know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. May it be so. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) How would your life have to change to better hear John the Baptist's voice crying out in the wilderness?
- 2) Who can you help to see the way that Jesus has prepared? Pray...
- 3) What would your life look like if you allowed God to choose the path of faith that you are walking?