

“Prepare ye the way of the Lord”
12/10/06
Brentwood 1st Presbyterian Church
The 2nd Sunday of Advent
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I told you a few Sundays ago that I have an affinity for Luke. He is both the physician to Apostle Paul, and he is a preacher. It is exciting for me that my first year as a minister has Luke as the lectionary for the entire year.

Nehemiah 4:6

So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberias, 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet of Isaiah, “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.’”

Sequence 1

Today is the second Sunday in Advent, 2006 AD, and today’s message is the 4th in a series of 6 about building up spirituality in a church. Our church. God places John the Baptizer, cousin of Jesus, in a particular time and place. God has a plan for John, and John has figured it out. Like John, God also places us in a particular time and place. We are at the end of the second year of the 2nd presidential term of George W. Bush, and the end of the 1st gubernatorial term of Phil Bredesen. The Rev. Joan Gray is the moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, and Clifton Kirkpatrick is the stated clerk for the General Assembly.

But Luke's words put us in another particular time and another particular place. The time of the political rulers Tiberias, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias. The time of the religious rulers Annas and Caiaphas. A time and place 2000 years ago with John the Baptizer in the wilderness. And to understand this particular time and place, we need to understand John the Baptizer and his audience. We need to understand the meaning of his words recounted in scripture, and we need to understand the Isaiah scroll he was quoting. This is not too difficult. After all, God says that in Christ Jesus, all things are possible!

Sequence 2

Luke tells us John the Baptizer went into all the region, proclaiming a **βαπτισμα** of **μετανοιασ** for the **αφεσιν** from sin. In English, John proclaimed a cleansing, which for him was symbolic of a change of heart. A change of heart with a turn away from self and immediate family. A turn toward God. A change of heart, symbolized by Baptism, which releases us from the power of sin. In our time and place, we translate the original Greek words **βαπτισμα**, **μετανοιασ** and **αφεσιν** as Baptism, repentance, and forgiveness. But this stained glass, churchified language has almost lost its meaning, sort of like a memorized prayer, a memorized creed, or a pledge of allegiance. We recite them without thinking. But scholars tell us that in John the Baptizer's day these Greek words had a more particular meaning. **βαπτισμα** meant a ritual bath that prepares Jews for entrance into the temple. **μετανοιασ** meant a change of heart. And **αφεσιν** meant a letting go or release.

In Jewish culture, ritual washing was important. The purpose of Jewish ritual washing is to be pure enough for entrance into the Temple. But this ritual washing is

given new symbolic meaning by John the Baptizer. Even today, we believe the church is a hospital for sinners, not a citadel of purity. For John and his followers, Baptism symbolizes God's **μετανοιας**, God's transformation. God changes our hearts. Water has always had symbolic meaning. In John's culture, they knew rain transforms the Judean desert, over night, from a tundra populated only by small dry rocks, into a flower garden. Baptism symbolizes this kind of change. John the Baptizer says, "experience the water, let God change your heart, and be freed from the desert of sin."

We recall how things used to be, in contrast to how they are now. And too frequently, our past history controls our actions. Causes us to sin. We know that history contains BOTH the reason for past failures AND the seeds of future successes. We know that to move into God's future, we let go of our attachment to the past. We remember the past, but let go of our attachment to it. What we read translated into English as forgiveness is a translation from the Greek word **αφεσιμ**. . This word has two meanings: forgiveness, and releasing or letting go. These two meanings are related, aren't they? While remembering their history, the Jews also hear John the Baptizer's call for change and letting go. We have to let go to move forward. Letting go of our past, changing our heart and our ways, and trusting in God's future.

Among theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr is a well known name. While in divinity school, I read a book he wrote 80 years ago. He is more famous in our culture for a prayer he wrote, "The Serenity Prayer." This prayer was hanging on the kitchen wall in my parent's home when I was growing up, and I read it every day. I think it is still hanging there. It is used by Alcoholics Anonymous in their 12 step program. It has given many people meaning in our turbulent world. I read it again 4 weeks ago when one of my

friends gave me a copy. You know how the prayer goes, “O God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can. And the wisdom to know the difference.” I used to really like this prayer. I used to think of it as the oncologist’s prayer. But as I prepared for today’s message, it gave me pause. Because I struggle with Reinhold Niebuhr’s opinion that some things cannot be changed.

What is it that cannot be changed, which Niebuhr says we need serenity to accept? I submit there are only two things which cannot be changed. The past, and the fact that God loves you. Everything else is up for God’s transformation. Only history and God’s love cannot be changed. So we let go of attachment to a past which cannot be changed, and we embrace the idea that the only future we have lies in God’s love and transformation. God is in charge of our transformation. Not we ourselves.

John proclaims that his particular world of 2000 years ago is about to change forever. To be ready for that world to change, he says God will first transform and change his hearers. John the Baptizer then invites them, and us, to a Baptism of change for release from the power of sin. For release from the power of the past. John the Baptizer’s Good News from 2000 years ago, is that regardless where and when we are, God calls us to transformation. God calls us away from our past and into God’s future.

Sequence 3

John the Baptizer announces an opportunity for change. God created the world. And now John the Baptizer tells us creation is going to take on an entirely different appearance. The world must change so it is ready for Jesus. The world undergoes a change, and empty things become filled, high things become low, crooked things become

straight, and rough things become smooth, so people can see the heart of God. And we see that flowers can indeed bloom in the desert. A new heaven and a new earth.

I am reminded of a true story. A woman dies and her pastor preaches the funeral. He says, "I am mad at God. I am mad at God for taking this good woman. I just don't understand. So I asked God why he took this good woman. And not one of these other women sitting on the front row here! He says God answered him. He says God told him that the good woman was ready to die. But the other women were just not ready for heaven yet!

Before Jesus' birth, the world was not ready yet. Not ready for God's full revelation. But between the time of creation and the birth of Jesus, the world became a different place. God so loved the world, that in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus. God does not want us to be afraid or distant. God wants us to come close, so close that we can rest in the intimacy of God as children in their mother's arms. So God became a little baby. Who can be afraid of a little baby? God wanted to become so powerless as to be unable to eat or drink, walk, play, or work without the help of many people. God became dependent on human beings to grow up and live among us. This is the mystery of the incarnation. God humbled himself, and became vulnerable.

Conclusion

Henri Nouwen wrote lots of books on spirituality. He says at first we know God as the God for us. Then, when Jesus comes, we know God as the God with us. Finally, when Jesus sent his Spirit, we know God as the God within and between us.

Nouwen says Jesus comes not in the distant future, but in the here and now. An ongoing event around us, between us, and within us. So we peel off the blindfolds that prevent us from seeing his coming in the midst of our own world.

God locates us in a particular time and place. We are at the end of the second year of the 2nd presidential term of George W. Bush, the end of the 1st gubernatorial term of Phil Bredesen. The Rev. Joan Gray is the moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, and Clifton Kirkpatrick is the stated clerk for the General Assembly.

What if during their term of office, a man runs about in the wilderness, courageously asking us to open to change? What if he then courageously asks us to be God's instruments to change the world?

God gives us courage to listen to John the Baptizer. John proclaims the one who comes. The one of whom angels sing. God gives joy to the world. Every heart prepares him room. Earth receives her king.