

Sermon Notes for 12/6/15 (Advent 2)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 3:1-6

Theme: AN UNLIKELY HERALD, A LIFE-CHANGING MESSAGE

Hymn: LBW 36 (On Jordan's Banks the Baptist's Cry)

The Point: God uses an unlikely spokesman at an unlikely time to bring people an unlikely message, yet a message that brings them hope, forgiveness and life.

Introduction: The “topography” of people’s lives can be pretty rough and unwelcoming. Valleys of disobedience, hills and even mountains of pride and self-will, crooked ways of spurning God’s will and trying to hide from His presence – this landscape is foreboding. Once again this last week we have witnessed in our land the results of random acts of evil invading the lives of people even in the midst of a holiday party at work. And the most telling truth about such acts is that our own hearts are subject to the same passions and resentments and desperation that prompted these killings. Evil will not be done away with just by outlawing guns or by locking up every murderer. As Jesus warned us, “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer.” And who of us could escape such a judgment?

In today’s Gospel, Luke mentions a good many men who were rulers and heads of state. Even the listing of their names brings to mind much of the evil and desperation that marked their reigns: Tiberias suffered from paranoia and was called by one historian “the gloomiest of men”; his death brought cheers from the Roman crowds, who shouted “To the Tiber with Tiberius”, referring to a method of disposal for the corpses of criminals. Pontius Pilate, whom we have come to know as the compulsive hand-washer, was a man willing to do almost anything to stay in power. Herod Antipas divorced his wife and married Herodias, his brother’s wife; he also put John the Baptizer to death, having him beheaded in prison over a drunken oath that he gave to a dancing maiden. Caiaphas was implicated in plotting the death of Lazarus, whose resurrection was an embarrassment to his party, and he presided over the Sanhedrin at Jesus’ mock trial. John the Baptizer, a rather unlikely spokesman, spoke out against the people (and especially the leaders) of his day who were following paths of self-service at the expense of the lowly and the poor. He could be speaking to us today as well, for we have often forsaken the pleasant ways of righteousness and truth in favor of deception and thievery and self-exaltation.

This foreboding, crooked, rough landscape, more barren than the landscape of the moon, makes our hearts inhospitable for the Lord’s rule. This is so true that Malachi, in announcing the coming of the Messiah, the “messenger of the covenant,” asks the question, “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” Scripture warns that there is no one who does good, not one who consistently seeks God. We have all together become corrupt. Even among those who claim to be Jesus’ followers, there is a dividing line drawn. Jesus warned that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom – Judgment Day will uncover the hypocrisy, the duplicity, the insincerity that marks too many of our words and deeds. When we pretend to put out the welcome mat for Christ, but still harbor in our hearts the desire to please ourselves, we put ourselves on the path to destruction.

In his book *I Surrender*, Patrick Morley writes that the church's integrity problem is in the misconception “that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior.” He goes on to say, “It is revival without reformation, without repentance.” (Quoted by C. Swindoll, *John The Baptizer, Bible Study Guide*, p. 16)

Continuance in this path results in final judgment and ultimate destruction. Malachi compares the messenger of the covenant to “refiner’s fire” and to “fullers’ soap”. I think we understand the meaning of the refiner’s fire – the searing, scorching heat that is applied to unrefined precious metals such as gold or

silver. In the process of the refining, the gold or silver is super-heated until the dross, the excess material that is not the metal, is carried away or burned off so that only the pure metal remains. Fuller's soap we may not recognize as easily. (This is not the Fuller brush man.)

Fullers whitened or cleaned garments. An alkaline substance would be dissolved in a vat of water, and then the clothes would be stomped on with the feet or beaten with bats or clubs. Sometimes the alkaline substance would include urine or other very offensive-smelling ingredients, so that fullers usually carried on their trade outside the city walls, far away from the sensitive noses of housewives and merchants. Refining was also something removed from the mainstream of the city, due to the dangers of the extremely high heat. God's judgment burns hot against those who imagine themselves to be immune to such judgment. His purpose is always a cleansing and renewing purpose, but for those who insist on identifying themselves as dross rather than taking on the new identity as a servant of the King, that judgment brings nothing but loss and condemnation.

God's messenger, unlikely though he may be, points to the radical reconstruction that our Lord brings about. In the coming of Jesus the Messiah, our Lord is fulfilling all the promises He made to people from the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Malachi put it this way: "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." It may seem like a most unlikely time for the Messiah to show up. The scribes and Pharisees and the priests thought it was THEIR temple. After Jesus had raised Lazarus from death, they met together and said, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

But Jesus had other ideas, as He showed when He drove out the money-changers and those who were trading sacrificial animals on the temple grounds. It was not "their place," but it was the Lord's place. It was His holy throne. Because the king was coming, it was vital for the preparatory campaign to be carried out, which is just what John was doing. When our president travels, there are huge steps of preparation to be made – security people turn over every rock and shake every bush on his proposed route, police and military personnel occupy the area in order to minimize threats to his life. Money is no object in making sure the way is safe for the president. And even then, as we well know, there are huge failures!

John announced that he was serving to prepare the way of the Lord, not just the way of an itinerant rabbi or a carpenter turned preacher. His preparation had nothing to do with organizing the military or the secret service. His preparation reached deeper into the hearts of people. In the coming of Jesus, God shows Himself to be an interfering king, an intrusive judge, and (what C.S. Lewis called) a "meddling God." The preparation He looks for is not to make His way safe, but to make His coming into our lives a welcome and an abiding presence. Jesus does not walk the safe and easy way. He walks the road of suffering and even of death, because that is the way our sin has built for Him. It is the way of the cross, and He is intent on walking it to the very end. And in His dying and rising from death, He meddles with our world and opens it up to new possibilities. Repentance means death to the old way of life – and a new horizon of infinite potential.

According to Paul Lee Tan's *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, "The Romans sometimes compelled a captive to be joined face-to-face with a dead body, and to bear it about until the horrible odors and discharge destroyed the life of the living victim. Virgil describes this cruel punishment poetically: 'The living and the dead at his command/Were coupled face to face, and hand to hand;/ Till choked with stench, in loathed embraces tied,/The lingering wretches pined away and died.'" Without Christ, we are shackled to a dead corpse -- our sinfulness. Only repentance and trust in His forgiveness frees us from certain death, for life and death cannot coexist indefinitely. (*Today in the Word*)

In fact, God is doing radical surgery on our lives. "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.” Our Lord willingly meets us wherever we are, whether on the heights of our own success or in the backwaters of our self-made cesspool. Then He works to renew and to renovate our lives by the power of His Word and His Spirit. He empowers us to walk in His ways and to speak His truth.

Luke quotes the prophet Isaiah when he talks about people seeing the salvation of God. When we see the salvation of our God, things change drastically. That salvation is embodied in the person of Jesus, God’s Messiah. His love binds Him to us and offers to us a new status, namely we are adopted as sons and daughters of the King. Paul talks about God’s love in our lives producing a “harvest of righteousness.” Our lives become new. Our desires are reprogrammed. Our wills are joined to God’s will. Our hearts are filled with His Spirit. Our hope springs anew.

This is what Advent is all about. Even those of us who have been joined to Christ for decades and a lifetime hear these words in a new way today: “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Our lives need a fresh start. We know how easily we can fall back into our self-serving ways. But we have been baptized into Jesus Christ. Our sin-saturated self died with Him at Calvary. Repentance, turning away from that caricature of ourselves toward the new life that Christ offers, this is the constant path that we walk as disciples of our Savior. We are, quite frankly, born again – not just once, but in an ongoing way as the repentance and faith begun in baptism continue to mark our way of living.

One theologian has written about this new birth, “The use of the figure of new birth to describe this change emphasizes two facts about it. The first is its decisiveness. The regenerate man has forever ceased to be the man he was; his old life is over and a new life has begun; he is a new creature in Christ, buried with him out of reach of condemnation and raised with him into a new life of righteousness. The second fact emphasized is that regeneration is due to the free, and to us, mysterious, exercise of divine power. Infants do not induce or cooperate in their own procreation and birth; no more can those who are dead in trespasses and sins prompt the quickening operation of God's Spirit within them.” (James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986) But as God’s Spirit operates on us, we have new life.

As John proclaimed the kingdom, so we become agents of God’s desire that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Our Lord is intent that the news of His forgiving love should be spread abroad to every tongue and nation and language and people. That takes the constant work of the Word of God in the hearts and lives of people. A *Reader’s Digest* article some 35 years ago noted some interesting medical research. “Compared with salamanders and starfish, mammals have a dismally limited ability to replace lost parts. But now reports of children growing back finger tips and spleens are changing that. In 1974, Cynthia Illingworth, an English physician specializing in emergency medicine, discovered that when children accidentally sever the fingertip (down to the first joint), the best treatment is no treatment. Cleaned and covered with a bandage, the fingertip, including the nail, grows back. In 11 or 12 weeks the new fingertip usually looks as if nothing had happened to it. There seem to be three requirements for regrowth: the patient must be under 12 years old, the cut must be above the crease of the first joint, and surgeons must keep hands off the injury. Any operation performed on the finger destroys its ability to grow back. The last condition is the hardest to accept, admits Dr. Michael Bleicher, a pediatric surgeon at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City.” (*Reader's Digest*, March, 1980)

Conclusion: God uses an unlikely spokesman at an unlikely time to bring people an unlikely message, yet a message that brings them hope, forgiveness and life. Paul’s prayer for his readers is my prayer for each of you today: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” Your life is not just a matter of what happens today or tomorrow, but how you will be

shaped for eternity, what harvest of righteousness God may work in and through you. John the Baptizer has some important things to say to you about that. This unlikely spokesman, who appears at an unlikely time, brings each of us an unlikely message about God's work in history to bring us His salvation. And that unlikely message, focused on the coming of the One who will be born in Bethlehem only to die in Jerusalem, but whose resurrection brings a new dawn of life – that message is designed to bring you the assurance of God's forgiveness and of the life and hope that come from knowing you are forgiven. To God be the glory for His unfailing love! AMEN!