

“THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF JOHN”

Luke 3:1-6

preached December 6, 2009

At a particular time and place, at just the right time, in just the right place, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, and he went into all the region around the River Jordan to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

Every year, twice before Christmas and once after, the lectionary and most of the Christian Church will trot out John the Baptist to gawk at him a little bit. He dresses funny and maintains a strict and unusual diet. He comes with an attitude of anger and arrogance, convinced that he knows exactly how everyone else should live, how they should act, what they should do with their life. Considered in that light, he would probably fit quite well on most college campuses, though his narrow and judgmental religious views would offend many of the students and faculty around him. Of course many on the campus hold views that are just as narrow even though they won't admit it. But John is different from them, and so we can look at him with a combination of amazement and amusement, laughing at both his appearance and the harsh message that he delivered to so many, but not to us.

I know a lot of pastors, teachers, and pious people of all sorts who really like John. Most have this secret longing to speak to their congregations in the same harsh manner that John spoke to Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and kings. They want to threaten destruction on the people, just like the prophets of old, who came down hard on the hypocritical nature of humanity. Of course they don't do that because they don't want to deal with the consequences. Most prophets were hated and eventually killed because we don't want to hear the truth in their condemnations. So instead of changing our lives, we end theirs. Knowing that history, and recognizing that we all want to be liked and accepted, that we really want to keep getting paid, we, that is pastors, often try to find ways to soften the words and yet deliver the message of John with the same strength and vitality.

One of the first courses I took in seminary was called “Parish Practicality.” It was suppose to be a course on how to survive in a local church but it wasn't really all that helpful. It was taught by a guy who worked in total of one, count 'em one, local church, with a membership of 1500. He started as an associate pastor, became the senior pastor, and then moved to a conference position. He had several guest speakers, none of whom were working in a local church. There was one couple scheduled to come who were serving a local church, but they had to cancel because of the work load in the local church. That was the most practical part of the course, knowing that local church ministry requires a great deal of time, energy, and flexibility in one's lifestyle.

Anyway, one speaker delivered the message, “How to Be a Prophet and Still Keep Your Job.” That was funny because he, too, had served in a total of one local church, and then he got a

job as a religious lobbyist in Harrisburg. You see, he came to tell us how to be a prophet in the local church, how to bluntly tell people how rotten they were and how condemnation is about to take them down big time and still stay employed. But his method of doing that was to actually get a job as a legal or political prophet. Then he could think of himself in the same light as Amos and Isaiah, as Jonah and John. Then he could come with an attitude of anger and arrogance, convinced that he knew exactly how everyone else should live, how they should act, and what they should do with their life.

Now when we read about John in various sections of the New Testament, we see the anger and arrogance of John with great certainty. We hear proclamations of justice and condemnation pour forth from the scriptures. We see a very animated John ranting and raving like a deranged radical standing on the street corner, shouting from atop his soap box. It is, and it should be an amazing and amusing sight. But it is a very slanted and inaccurate view of the ministry of the man we call the Baptist.

John’s life was focused wholly and completely on the Lord. While still in the womb he leaped with excitement when the still unborn Jesus came close. John’s birth was the fulfillment of a divinely proclaimed prophecy. When he grew to manhood, he separated himself from the community in which he was raised. He went into the wilderness so there would be no distractions in his pursuit of a stronger and more complete relationship with the Lord, with the God of creation and grace. And at just the right time, he stepped forth to fulfill his purpose, to prepare the people of the earth to receive their Savior, their King, their God. But John did not begin with condemnation and judgment. No! He began with compassion and grace.

As it was written in the book of Isaiah, *“Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, 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.”* It was first spoken to the children of Israel in a time when they were living in exile, away from the land of promise the Lord had given them. Isaiah said that although the people were now separated from the life they expected, the Lord had not forgotten them. The light of salvation, the powerful compassion of the Lord was about to reach out to them. It was a call to lift up their hearts, to lift up their hope, for God was coming to them, and there would be a time of celebration, of rejoicing, of peace. Though their world looked dark, though their future looked bleak, the Lord would transform their lives in hope, in joy, in love.

John brought a message of hope, the hope that they did not have to go through life alone; the hope of a new beginning, a new relationship with God. John brought a message to excite and ignite the hearts of the people, the idea that God himself would stand among them, would

minister to them. A message of hope, but many found that message to be frightening, to be downright scary. It brought them stress and fear for they knew that when they stood in the light of God, when they stood before the Messiah, all their faults and imperfections, all their sins and pain would be there for all the world to see. They would have to admit to the poor choices they made, the hurtful words they said, the harmful paths they took. They would have to admit that they were never abandoned by God, but that they, freely and willfully chose to abandon God, to walk away in a prideful arrogance that led to their exile, their spiritual isolation, their personal prison of pain and fear.

John, who came as a prophet to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, this same John came with a message of hope and grace but it was painful and frightening because the people had to hear, had to acknowledge the truth that for years they wanted to ignore, that they tried to ignore. But if they wanted to see God, if they wanted to find salvation, they had to abandon the path in life on which their will had taken them. They had to turn their lives around, that is - repent', and come back to God even as God was coming to them.

It is important for us to hear and to understand the message that came through John. It is important for though the times and places, the names and faces change, people remain the same. Today there are millions living in spiritual isolation, in exile from God. The Lord has wanted to be with us, to watch over us, to give us the blessings of this world in abundance. From the beginning, the desire of the Lord has been that we live in harmony with one another and in harmony with the Lord, our God and our Creator. But we have refused to accept the counsel of God's wisdom. We have done what we have wanted without worrying about the consequences. We have made poor choices, said hurtful words, taken paths that have proved harmful to ourselves, and to those around us. Deep down we know that we have never been abandoned by God, but that we, freely and willfully chose to abandon God, to walk away in a prideful arrogance that has led to our exile, our spiritual isolation, our personal prison of pain and fear.

Some years ago I read a study that found that good economic times can be bad for our physical, mental, and emotional health. That is far from what we expect, and many will search for ideas, both simple and complex, to try to explain it. I believe the answer is simple, though difficult for many to accept. You see, we spend an awful lot of time and energy seeking financial rewards. As a society we have convinced ourselves that our highest need is to maintain a strong economy, that when our personal savings gets high enough that we no longer have to ask the price, when we have the ability to write the check that enables us to do as we please, then all our problems will be solved. Then everything will be just hunky-dory.

But that ideology is flawed, erroneous from its initiation, disingenuous even from its very genesis. And the closer we come to achieving that financial goal, the more we recognize that something is missing. The bank may be satisfied, but the soul is empty. Many living in economic prosperity are yet struggling with spiritual poverty. Then we must acknowledge that the false promise of hope has left us hopeless and helpless; that basing our life on a purpose of prosperity has left us in spiritual poverty and pain; that in our primary chase after stocks, bonds, and cash, we have failed to be bonded in the love and compassion that makes life possible, purposeful, and peaceful. When we finally achieve what all the world tells us we want, we discover that it is really not as important, not as vital as we had been told. And so the pain, the fear and loneliness begin to ravage our hearts and souls until the hope of salvation is seen as something far beyond our reach.

To a world living in darkness a great light will shine. In the tradition of Isaiah, in the spirit of John, I bring God’s word to you. Though you may be living in exile, far from the land of promise the Lord has offered you; though you may be separated from the life you expected to live, the Lord has not forgotten you. The light of salvation, the powerful compassion of the Lord is about to reach out to you. It is a call to lift up your hearts, to lift up your hope, for God is coming to you, and there will be a time of celebration, a time of rejoicing, a time of peace. Though the world may look dark, though the future may look bleak, the Lord will transform our lives in hope, in joy, in love. It is a message of hope, the hope that we do not have to go through life alone, the hope of a new beginning, of a new relationship with God. It is a message to excite and ignite the hearts of all peoples, the idea that God himself will stand among us, will minister to us. A message of hope, of power, of peace. And all we have to do to receive it is to turn our lives around, to repent, to look upon God again, even as God is coming to us.

On this day, are you prepared for the Lord to enter your life? Have you filled in the valleys and knocked down the hills that have hidden Him from your sight? Have you paved the path to your heart, that old stony dirt road filled with road blocks and pot holes? Have you paved over that road so that it is no longer difficult to come together with Him? Have you turned to face Him, to receive Him? The Lord is coming, and the light of salvation is about to shine on you. Some will run away in fear. Some will run to the gods of Wal-Mart, Costco’s, Sam’s Club and Best Buy. But some will come near to live in the hope, the joy, the powerful and peaceful love that comes in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. May your life turn to receive the gift of grace, this glorious present of his presence. May you receive Him in your life this day and everyday, now and forever. Amen.