

St. John the Forerunner

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2nd Sunday in Advent 2015

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-- when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'" John preaches repentance and baptizes in the region of the Jordan.

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This week and next, our Gospel readings invite us to consider John the Baptizer. = Annual opportunity to be reminded of this key individual in our Lord's life.

Usually referred to as "**John the Baptist**"..or as "**John the Baptizer**" since that activity is essential to his identity.

I, personally think that "**John the Forerunner**" would be even better.....that was his chief mission.....Preparing the way of the Lord.....but doubt if it will catch on.

But whatever we call him..... WHO WAS HE?

In the **7th chapter of Luke**..... When our Lord refers to John the Baptizer as "more than a prophet"... he was **NOT denying** that John was a prophet. Indeed, he quickly adds "there is no greater prophet that John the Baptizer".

When John was born, his own father, Zacharias, "filled with the Holy Spirit" said about his newborn son: "You child, will be called the prophet of the Highest." John's contemporaries certainly regarded him as a prophet....and Matthew tells us that even Herod regarded him as such.

Our Lord also said of John: "among those born of women there is none greater than John the Forerunner." That means at least as great as: St. Paul, St. John, St. Matthew, or any of the other apostles !

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Luke begins his gospel by giving us the details on his early life..

You probably remember that his parents: Zachariah & Elizabeth were elderly with no children. One day as Zachariah was doing his priestly duties in the Temple...the angel Gabriel appeared to him....told him that his wife would bear him a son...that they would call John.

He must not drink any wine or strong drink (practiced by those who took the Nazirite Vow...suggesting that John might have taken such a vow---which also included never cutting your hair, etc.) Gabriel also told the elderly Zechariah that from John's birth he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Zechariah questioned Gabriel's message....since he knew both he and his wife....were well past the child-bearing years. And....because he doubted....he was not able to speak until his son was born.

In Elizabeth's 6th month of pregnancy....another visitor came, not an angel---but Elizabeth's cousin from Galilee, a younger woman named Mary. At Mary's greeting... Elizabeth's "babe leaped within her womb" because Mary was carrying in her body, the newly incarnate Son of God!

BTW - Mary's response = "The Magnificat" = Mary's song of praise (vespers canticle)

Luke goes on to tell us that John as a child.....grew and developed in body and spirit....then lived in the desertwhere the Word of God came to him. After that he appeared publicly to the people of Israel.....Wore clothes made of camel hair, with leather belt....Food was locusts and wild honey

That's where we encounter him in today's Gospel....

Calling people to turn away from their sin and baptizing in the Jordan River.....in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, his Lord, Jesus Christ. He certainly didn't mince words. John the Forerunner... shatters the silence of the wilderness with his cry: "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**"

Repent is NOT feeling sorry for what you did or have been doing ...NOT regretting that you did it "Repent," = change the way we live,..... repent and prepare for the coming of the kingdom of heaven which will upset all our securities and overturn anything we try to leave in place.

He would later baptize our Lord...and your probably remember that still later he was executed by Governor Herod.... at the request of the daughter of Herodias, [at the behest of her mother].... because she resented John's condemnation of their adulterous relationship. Most of us learned about John the Baptizer in Sunday School and have been reminded of it periodically in Bible classes.

So WE KNOW WHO HE WAS.

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But we need to ask the Lutheran question:

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

WHAT IS HIS MESSAGE TO US TODAY?

He tells to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Our incarnate Lord came as tiny baby over 2,000 years ago

But we need to prepare for Him to come to us also.

HOW DO WE PREPARE?

DOESN'T MEAN

Clean and decorate our houses and yard,
Bake all sorts of Christmas goodies
Get all our shopping done
Send out Christmas Cards, and/or newsletter

NO ! John calls us to repentance.... as preparation
Called to repent ...to prepare
Means "to turn" = change direction...priorities

Does not mean we have to change our jobs or vocations...as if some lines of work are more holy than others. As we heard in today's Gospel:

He doesn't tell tax collectors to quit and do something betterbut rather.... "Collect no more than you are authorized to" --- don't overcharge and keep the extra money.

He doesn't tell those in the military to quit and become pacifists rather.. "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations....and be content with your wages."

Repentance is more about how we live our lives....our values ...our priorities.

As Pastor Spencer reminded us last Sunday....we are called to be counter-cultural.....to go against the tide...against the values & priorities ...of the majority of our culture.

For example.....We are living in a culture that values convenience. We value power windows in our cars....nonstop flights... seedless watermelons...skinless/boneless chicken breasts....overnight delivery...microwave ovens.....Amazon.com....GPS....---all provide us with convenience...and make our lives easier.

But perhaps the epitome of convenience are our cell phones !..or more precisely our "**smart phones.**" I didn't finally get one until a year or two ago (tell story)....and now I love it !!-----not only allows me to call and talk to people (I could do that before with my old flip phone).....but my wife and sons have shown me it is also a camera,... a flashlight,... a calculator,... an alarm clock, a map....a calendar.. and appointment book...etc., etc.....It even fits in the palm of our hand and comes in different colors.

All of which make my and many other people's lives much more convenient....and easier!

Our Christian life, however, is the complete opposite....which is one reason we Christians have such a difficult time living the Christian life today. In a word...it is not "convenient".

The Christian life is not about "easy"...or "better"..or "faster". It's not about surrounding ourselves with everything we can obtain so that we can live comfortably. In fact, ...the Christian life is not about us at all. It's about God and our neighbor. We are to put God first in our lives....to love and trust in Him above all things. We are to call upon Him in every trouble We are to pray, praise and give thanks to him We are hear and learn His word. We are asked to do for others....to give to others....to sacrifice for others....which is not always convenient in our busy world. We just don't have the time!

The truth is this: the Christian life is not easy...nor is it meant to be easy. And the irony is.... That even after we try very hard to do the things that Jesus asks us to do.....there is no guarantee that our lives will be any easier. That doesn't seem fair!

The truth is....when we follow Jesus..... it only seems to complicate our life....which is why some people choose to follow Him sometimes....or not at all. To commit to Jesus wholeheartedly is just too difficult to do.

We are not followers (disciples) of our Lord Jesus Christ---because it's convenient.....or it's fun....or because it will make more people like us

Quite the contrary these days. There was a time.... When people who went to church on Sunday, and tried to live committed lives to their Lord...who believed in God....were very much appreciated and respected by others. No so any more !!!

Yet...that shouldn't surprise us too much. The cross/crucifix is a reminder to us that the way is hard. Our life as Christians will always be difficult....because we follow that way of the cross. We will undoubtedly experience hardships...and sufferings...and persecutions. But we will not suffer them alone. Our Lord is with us....every step of the way....to the end of the age! When he stumble and fall...HE picks us up and helps us keep going.....no matter how tough the going is.

He also reminds us....that our difficulties...our sufferings are only for a time. The Cross...though necessary...is only part of the Christian way. The other part is... the empty tomb...the Resurrection--
--New Life---Eternal Life.

The cross and sufferings... only last for a time....But the new life in Christ lasts forever...feasting in paradiseIn a mansion—our eternal home---that has been prepared for us.

That's what we always need to keep in mind as we make our way through life....a journey that lasts as long as we live and breath

There may be times we can identify with Charlie Brown, thinking we'll Never kick the football.....Never fly a kite.....Never know the joy of a winning baseball season But as Charlie Brown never stopped trying.....We need to always remember the glory that awaits us in heaven.

As the 2nd stanza of one of my favorite hymns = last hymn in TLH(#660) says:

What though the tempest rage...HEAV'N IS MY HOME

Short is my pilgrimage...HEAV'N IS MY HOME

And time's wild wintry blast, soon shall be overpast;

I shall reach home at last, HEAV'N IS MY HOME

In the meantime..... while we are still on our pilgrimage....To truly respond to St. John the Forerunner's call....to prepare for the coming of our Lordwe need to ask God to help us. To ask him "create new hearts for us"..... "to renew right spirits within us"... We do exactly that, every time in our liturgy when we respond to the Word --- read and preached---that we call the Offertory !

The offertory is actually a sung prayer response....a wonderful prayer straight out of the 51st Psalm! In it We ask God

To create in us a clean hearts

To renew a right spirit within us,

That he not cast us away from his presence,

nor take His Holy Spirit from us.

That He would restore to us a joy of our salvation....and uphold us (through this life) with His free spirit.

We will do that in just a moment.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.