

“There’s Work To Be Done!” Advent Two a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church December 10, 2006

TEXT: Luke 3:1-18 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, 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 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.”’ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’ And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’ So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

EACH YEAR, during this season of Advent, we --the church -- set off on a journey. We begin to prepare our hearts and our minds for the coming of the Christ-child, so that this time he will have a proper place to be born.

But the problem is that every year, no matter what direction we turn to head toward Bethlehem, there’s this roadblock. There’s no way around it – or, to put a finer point on it, no way around HIM!

Every year, one of the gospel writers gives these directions: "So you want to go to Bethlehem, do you? Tell you what to do: go on out to the desert, outside of the relatively safe confines of Jerusalem. Keep going till you get to the Jordan River. You’ll know it when you see it. It’s the only river around these parts. You’ll find a man there – strange looking old coot – standing knee-deep in the water, yelling and baptizing, yelling and baptizing. That’ll be John the Baptist. You ask him how to get to Bethlehem. If you want to get to Bethlehem, you have to start there at the Jordan with John. He’s the only one who can help you get there."

They all say the same thing, all four of them – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They all say that if you really want to go to Bethlehem, first you have to encounter John the Baptist. Advent pilgrims on the way to the manger must always pass through the desert where John is preaching, preaching his one and only sermon: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."

That's it. No cute stories, no three points and a poem, no worn-out, pious clichés. He just stands there, roaring his one-line sermon like a lion. You could probably hear him long before you could catch sight of him. You could hear "REPENT!" echoing off the barren desert landscape. He judges and he berates.

And I don't want to hear that, especially now, at this time of the year. Don't you just want to shout back, "Lighten up, John! You crusty old party-pooper! I don't like you, especially not at Christmas!!

Ahhh, but it is not Christmas yet. And John is a prophet. Stern apocalyptic warnings and exhortation are his stock in trade! And prophets are supposed to make you uncomfortable. It's not what prophets say about the future that's alarming; it's what they say about the PRESENT. They say, "You've got it all wrong! You'd better repent!" Prophets rarely disclose anything new or earth-shattering about the present. They simply tell us what we already knew but didn't want to be reminded of—that we need to change. John may judge and berate, but he speaks truth.

A gentler prophet might be like the gas station attendant in New England. A tourist asked "How far is it to Boston?" The attendant replies, "Well, if you keep going the way you're headed it's about 2500 miles. But if you'll just turn around and go the other way, you'll find Boston 46 miles down this very road."

A prophet like John speaks a rigorous and uncomfortable honesty when he looks out at all the well-meaning seekers coming to him for baptism and snarls at the crowd, "You brood of vipers!" John watched the people flock to him –tax collectors and merchants and farmers and artisans and soldiers and even a few Pharisees and scribes. But instead of welcoming them, he looks deeper, and sees hypocrisy. John stands in the water ready for baptisms, but finds little or no evidence of true repentance.

And so he cries, "Repent!" If you really want to be prepared for the coming of judgment, then provide evidence of your repentant hearts.

Did you ever wonder why all those people kept coming out to the Jordan? Why did so many people take what John dished out? I think it has to do with the "Three R's" of Repentance. The first is Recognition: the awareness you are going in the wrong direction. Change is not possible, if you think things are just swell the way they are. Remember the series of government officials Luke used to introduce John's ministry? Luke's original audience would recognize these as a long list of individuals who acted to oppress the Hebrew people. Jesus, like they, was born into a time of governmental corruption and societal injustice. People arrived with an expectation bordering on desperation. They stayed because they were ready for something new. They came willing to change.

The second R is Regret: You must acknowledge the cost of going the wrong way. It is said that Noel Coward once sent identical notes to 20 most prominent men in London, saying, "All is discovered. Escape while you can." All 20 left town.

And finally, Reorient: the acknowledgement that transformation is unleashed by a willful act of imagination backed up by specific action. With a little humility and a lot of help from the Holy Spirit, it is possible for self absorbed people to cease thinking of themselves as

the center of the universe and begin to center their lives in God. It is possible to love God and neighbor more and worry about yourself less. It is possible to imagine a world of justice and community, free from fear and blame.

Just as John came to a world in distress, Luke wrote for people in distress. And he screamed that a different future was possible, and it was time to get ready to receive it. We've all heard the saying, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. But the Baptizer preached a different message: those who cannot imagine a different future will be condemned to be prisoners of the present.

Whatever original motivations individuals may have had for coming to see John, -- to go through the motions of ritual repentance, to see a freak show, perhaps out of genuine contrition -- John's promise of judgment stirs the crowd to ask what sort of deeds he has in mind. "What shall we do?"

So John gets specific, actually stating the obvious, telling his hearers what they already know, or at least should know. "Reorient" means put yourself in action. Care for the poor is the most basic Old Testament teaching, so John starts there. Abundance is meant for sharing, not hoarding for security. All that is required is seeing that others have none and then acting. Even tax collectors, he says, hinting that listeners would be surprised to hear of a positive response from this despised and marginalized group: "Don't collect more than you are supposed to." In the same way, the soldiers are not to extort by false accusation or other means. "Be satisfied with your wages" Baptisms of water and fire will purify leading people into alignment with God's purpose. A new kin-dom that does not so much turn our values inside out, as set what is already overturned to right side up.

John's call for basic and expected works of justice and compassion can be translated into everyday works that prepare for the coming of Christ. John's job was to name what needs to be done so that Holy One might enter into the life of the world and our own lives.

The Lukan Advent calls us to work of concrete action and true service. John closes his little sermon by talking about a winnowing fork and chaff and grain and fire. We need to remember that the primary purpose of winnowing is not fire for the chaff, but saving for the grain.

There is certainly nothing modest about the message that JB delivered as he traveled the banks of the river Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the man had a vision that just wouldn't quit. God will lift up valleys and bring mountains low and you are hereby notified that you have roadwork to do in order to prepare the way and receive the blessing of the new in the world and in your life.

It isn't about getting your theology right, and it isn't about believing this or that, or of belonging to the right church or service club. It certainly isn't about giving the right gifts at Christmas. It is only partly about giving to the food bank or helping the street people. It's also about justice. It is about doing the right thing. It is about leveling the playing field. It's about political action.

"Let every heart/Prepare him room" Perhaps we would do well to say let every heart get out the bulldozers and backhoes, the rock crushers and road graders: There are mountains that need to come down - mountains of racism, sexism, ageism, and any other "-ism" that blocks our way to healthy relationships with one another and with our God.

There are valleys to be filled - valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, grief, pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship the Savior offers and that keep us from enjoying the fellowship of the faith.

There are crooked places to be made straight - yes, there is perversity, even among those we might never imagine; fine exteriors mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence.

There are rough places to be made smooth - rough places that have come because of oppression and injustice.

There is work to do! Bring on the heavy equipment! Let's get started.

May it be so. AMEN