

If anyone wanted to date stamp the birth of Jesus and the timing of his ministry, all they would need to do is read Luke's Gospel. Luke, who must have been a historian at heart, gives us plenty of details to help us establish a timeline for Jesus' life. In chapter 3, he begins with a litany of the leaders of the day. Pontius Pilate, a governor of Judea who rules under the auspices of Tiberius Caesar, emperor of Rome from year 14 to 37. Herod the Great's sons, Antipas and Philip, took control of their designated territories in 4 BCE, each ruling for nearly 40 years. The high priest Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas shared leadership of the temple along with others, from year 6 of the Common Era through year 36. From Luke's details, scholars have deduced John the Baptist began his public ministry between 26 and 28 CE.

Listing John, the son of Zechariah, among the prominent leaders of the day makes it clear the importance of John's role and work in the eyes of God. God went to a lowly Nazarite, one who lived in the desert, who never cut his hair or drank strong drink, was an unknown person in Judean society. John, who was without political power, social advantages, or economic clout, was called to be God's messenger, a voice of reason and an advocate for change.

In the wilderness, John heard a message of hope. So John came to the Jordan River to baptize the faithful. But the baptism he offered was different than the typical baptism of the times. Then, baptism was used for ritual cleansing or when one converted from Gentile to Jew. The baptism John called the people to was one of repentance and preparation.

Luke also assures us that with the coming of John, God's promises and the prophecies are being fulfilled. With the beginning of John's ministry the prophecy about him, given by the Angel Gabriel is affirmed. Gabriel said, "John will go before the Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared for him."¹ With the coming of John, Isaiah's prophecy is also fulfilled. John is the voice crying in the wilderness. John's voice urges us to prepare the way for the Lord.

Quoting the Prophet Isaiah, John presents us with a great image, an image of the depth of change needed to prepare for God's coming. The valleys will be filled and the mountains will be leveled. It is a mindboggling image. Picture the drastic change to the landscape if the grade on the 101 no longer had a steep incline or if Hwy 41 were straightened, eliminating the switchbacks and twists and

¹ Luke 1:16-17

dips. If such changes were to be made to just those two roads we would not recognize the area, the changes would be irreversible.

But the road the prophet is calling us to build is not one that is leveled by giant tractors and dozers under the supervision of civil engineers. This is a road we each must build. This straight road comes into being when we embrace John's message of a baptism of repentance. The word translated as repentance comes from the Greek term "metanoia." "Metanoia" is about an internal transformation that changes both heart and outlook. These changes are manifested by the way one lives.

To be repentant we are not just saying, "I'm sorry." To be repentant takes honesty, an analysis of the things we do and think. It is about letting go of old ways so we may embrace the ways of God.

Many of you know we have two dogs. I have to laugh at the oldest one. He loves treats. But he also loves his ball. If a ball is around it is in his mouth all the time. So when a treat is offered he becomes conflicted. While he wants a treat he also does not want to let go of his ball. The same logic, or the lack of it, is also true for us. We can't accept another's hand if our hands are full. We can't accept and live according to God's love and compassion if our hearts are filled with anger, jealousy or bitterness. We can't consume God's love and compassion if we are bent on consuming the ways of the world, resulting in our ignoring and abusing our neighbors or the earth.

Repentance is seldom pretty and often painful. In her book, Amazing Grace, Kathleen Norris shares a story about a time when she was teaching children poetry by reading the psalms to them. She encouraged them to write their own poems with the same honesty and awareness of life as offered in the psalms. She tells how the children were often brutally honest, sharing emotions carried deep within themselves, emotions and feelings and an awareness of their world that most of us, as adults, would rather not face.

One boy wrote a poem entitled "The Monster Who Was Sorry." "The boy begins the poem by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him. In the poem he responds to his father's yelling by throwing his sister down the stairs, wrecking his room, and eventually destroying the whole town. He concludes with the line, "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, I shouldn't have done all that." Ms. Norris concludes the boy sitting in his messy house is a metaphor for the depth of his fear and anger. Sitting in the messy room also provides him a pathway to change. She suggests that the boy was well on his way to

repentance. He is not a monster, but only human. If the house is messy, it can be cleaned and made into a place where God might wish to dwell.”²

While the child’s rage in his poem is brutal and illogical to an adult, he is being honest. How honest are we when it comes to looking at those things in our lives that cause us to despair, those feelings that cause us to want to destroy the world around us? How honest are we about what we do, that which may feel right and good at the time, but actually pull us away from God? Sitting in the messy rooms of our own making, we hopefully hear John’s call to repentance.

The prophet’s call to repentance is not just for individuals. It is also a call for us to look at the world around us and truly see what needs to be changed. John’s message is not about maintaining the status quo but making those changes to institutions, norms, rules, structures and systems within society, an organization, or the church, that are oppressive, crooked, or build stumbling blocks that lead people astray. Professor Judith Jones reminds us, “the claims that the world’s authorities make often conflict with God’s claims. Paths that seem satisfactory to us are not good enough or level enough for God.”³ Where are the bulldozers needed so we make this world, God’s world?

John’s message is consistent with Jesus’ message. Jesus brought in the proverbial bulldozers to effect change, for Jesus was definitely not about maintaining the status quo. Jesus ate with rich and poor alike. Jesus touched the untouchables of his society. He urged us to be rich in our love of God rather than rich in our love of material goods and power. And he taught his disciples to share the message of our need for change so we would be faithful to God’s ways and faithful in our efforts to build the kingdom of God today.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, even though we may not like it or comprehend it, we are also called to be prophets. We are called to speak out when we see an injustice, to stand beside those who are marginalized, and to open our hearts to those who are oppressed. John affirms we must keep sharing the good news until “all flesh has seen the salvation of God.”⁴

But most of us would prefer not to take on the role of being God’s messenger. For one thing, prophets are not necessarily accepted or welcome in their hometowns. Two, being a prophet requires us to really look at what is going on

² *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris, (New York; Riverhead Books, 1999), 69-70.

³ *Working Preacher*, “Commentary on Luke 3:1-6: December 6, 2015,” Judith Jones, accessed online 3 December 2018 @ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2702

⁴ Luke 3:6

around us, to look at the world not through our eyes but through the eyes of others. And three, we must be brutally honest with ourselves, where and how do we perpetuate or endorse a system or a way of being that is not life giving for all.

I am not sure if this information was released in an official study, but when a group was asked, "Who wanted change in the world?" All hands were raised. When the same group was asked, "Who was willing to make personal changes to make world change happen?" Not one hand went up. We like to think we are advocates for change but we don't want to face change.

Think about it, how often do we bury our heads in the sand, ignoring that a problem or an injustice exists? How often do we see a problem, but justify it by saying it is not my problem it needs to be taken care of by others? How often do we throw our hands up in the air and say there is nothing that can be done, and so turn our backs on the changes needed?

Being a messenger, sharing a prophetic voice, is hard work and one that may cause us to tremble in fear of the consequences to our well being because of our actions. Even so, we as individuals, and we, as the church, need to regain our prophetic voice, sharing the message of God's mercy and grace, love and compassion, with a world that is filled with fear and anger. We need to lift up our voices proclaiming to our secular world, that the Good News is for all and to keep sharing until all come to know God's redemptive love.

Which is why we have Advent. Advent is a time devoted to preparing ourselves in heart and mind, body and spirit, to turn ourselves around so we are willing and able to embrace the coming of the Messiah once again. For we have a message, a story, to share with the nations, in word, in song, and in deed. We have a message of hope, for the light of the world is coming, the light is among us, and this light will dispel the fear and darkness of our world.

Come. Let us prepare the way of the Lord. Come. Let us share the message of God's Good News. Amen