

Advent II -- 2009
“Clearing the Way Ahead”
Luke 3:1-18 (NRSV)

As Canadians we are well aware that, during the winter, city and highway crews will need to clear the **city roads and lanes and municipal and regional highways** from snow and ice so that traffic can move from place to place. Even before the snow flies, crews will make elaborate plans for emergencies and often put down a thin mixture of water and sodium chloride on the main roads and highways to prevent the first snowfall from making the roads too slippery for our vehicles’ tires. As a result, people will be able to come and go safely and efficiently. So, too, Advent is a good time to prepare for the coming of the King, especially by **clearing our minds and hearts and lives** from any other attractions or any fatal distractions so God may find easy entry. **This was John the Baptist’s ministry and mission, to clear the way ahead for the coming of the Messiah.**

Silence shrouds the first thirty years of the lives of John and Jesus who happened to be cousins, except for the stories of the annunciation of their birth, and the brief glimpse of Jesus during his brilliant visit to the temple in his twelfth year (Lk. 2:41-52). What we do know of those shrouded years must be deduced from the birth narratives and the attendant prophecies.

In the case of “**John, the son of Zechariah,**” who would be later known as “**John the Baptist**” (Mk. 1:4; Matt. 3:1), we know that at six months in his mother’s womb he “leaped” at the sound of the virgin’s voice (Lk.1;41), and so his ministry actually began three months before his birth! Unsurprisingly, that ought to tell us, if we didn’t know, how important the time a baby spends in his or her mother’s womb is. We are also told that “**even before his birth he [was] “filled with the Holy Spirit”** (1;15). So John’s life was **totally invaded by the Spirit** before birth and throughout his whole life. This dynamic spiritual influence, complemented, no doubt, by an unusually godly upbringing, would promote an unparalleled **spiritual formation** that prepared John for the beginning of his ministry at the age of thirty. Luke tells us in the final verse of chapter one that “The child grew and became **strong in spirit**, and he [lived] in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel” (Lk. 1:80). The reference here is to his human spirit, which had developed an amazing character and powerful convictions, and a passion that would sustain him during the most delightful and dangerous times of his life.

As Luke prepares us for his **dramatic appearance** upon the scene, he names no less than **seven historical figures** to establish the date and context of John's ministry. Taken together, the names indicate that John began his public ministry **about AD 27-29** (Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Luke I-IX, 1981, p. 326). Even more, they establish **the dark political ambience of the Roman-Palestinian governance**. All the civil names given here evoke wickedness and intrigue: right from the Emperor Tiberius; to Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea; to Herod, the puppet king of Judea; to Philip, the ruler of the area of Iturea and Trachonitis, just north east of the Galilee (where John was living and operating); and to Lysanias, the ruler of Abilene, near Damascus. The mere mention of the names of the high priests of the temple during that time – Annas and Caiaphas – similarly projects a degenerate priesthood. Annas had been priest from AD 6-15, and was followed by his four sons in succession, and eventually by his son-in-law, Caiaphas. The mention of their priesthood as one indicates a serpentine nepotism as well as an evil religious concentration of power.

It was against this background of **political and religious darkness** that “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Lk3:2). This was a **classic prophetic call**, because similar language was used for the calls of such great prophets as Isaiah (38:4) and Jeremiah (1:1-2; 13:3). So John strode full-blown onto the Jewish landscape dressed in **calculated radical prophetic garb**: with long, uncut flowing hair, and a robe of camel's hair, girded about with a leather thong, **along with his prophetic diet** of locusts and wild honey (Mk. 1:6; Matt. 3:4). The mere appearance of John in the desert wilderness was a call to repentance.

1. **John's preaching – a preparatory baptism** (Lk. 3:3-6).

Luke then introduces John's ministry with a concise sentence: “He went into all the region around the Jordan [River], **proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins ...**” (Lk. 3:3). **This did not mean that baptism brings forgiveness of sins.** In fact, John's baptism followed each believing person's repentance and was a sign of it. John called on people to repent (turn away from their sins), and the subsequent acceptance of his baptism was an indication that they had done so. The proper view of John's ministry is to see him full of the Spirit and preaching with such effect that multitudes visibly fell under conviction, resulting in many repenting of their sins, and then asking for John's baptism.

There is also no suggestion here that repentance is a human work that merits the forgiveness of God. There's no hint of the idea that if we repent, God will look favourably upon us. **John's ministry is consonant with Paul's teaching in Ephesians** that we "were dead through our trespasses and sins in which [we] once lived, following the course of this world..." (2:1-2a), and that we are saved by grace, through faith, and [that it is]... not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works ..." (2:8-9a), and that we have been [re]created in Christ Jesus for good works ..." (2:10). John's ministry, resulting in repentance was entirely due to the work of the Holy Spirit as he preached in the Spirit's power to God's covenant people. The Holy Spirit convicted them, and the Holy Spirit gave them the grace to believe John's message and repent. (Compare Jesus' own similar understanding of this truth revealed in his Upper Room conversation with the disciples (John 16:8-11). Baptism was, and still is, a sign and seal of the Spirit-given grace of forgiveness, given to those who are committed to being repentant.

It's important for us to see the **close connection between repentance and forgiveness**, because while no amount of repentance can ever merit forgiveness in the sight of God, without repentance no soul will ever be "saved." Repentance is **the tell-tale mark** of the grace of God at work in our lives. **Saving faith and true repentance are always found together.** Saved souls are repentant souls. This is something prominent people like former president, **Bill Clinton**; late night comedian, **David Letterman**; and golf pro, **Tiger Woods**, as well as ordinary people, like you and me, may have to learn (Douglas Todd, "Tiger Wood's 'transgressions' offer lessons for us all," The Vancouver Sun, Friday, December 4, 2009, p. A6). Addicts have to learn it, and every Christian has to learn it, day by day, week by week, and year by year. Scripture and my own experience have taught me that **an ongoing spirit of repentance** – repenting not only of overt and public sins, but also of the private sins of self-centredness, negative attitudes, minor moral omissions and unbelief – is not only a sign of salvation but is a necessity for spiritual health.

John preached "**a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**" with incredible power, thousands responded and repented, and as Luke noted, **the ancient prophecy of Isaiah (40:3-5) was fulfilled:**

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' (Lk. 3:4-6).

This prophecy reflected the widespread custom that when an eminent ruler was about to visit a city, the citizens would construct a **smooth, broad road** so he could enter the city with due pomp and dignity. A modern equivalent is **the famed Champs Elysees** (literally, "the field of heaven") road in Paris, France, first used with great effect by Napoleon and his armies. But Isaiah's vision was far grander. The highway wasn't just a grand entry to a city, but a great through-fare through a forbidding mountainous wilderness. He saw entire mountains flattened and deep valleys filled in so a broad superhighway could be made ready for the Messiah-King. If you find that hard to picture, think only of the \$2 billion spent on improving **the fabulous Sea-to-Sky Highway** recently, on our west coast, for the Olympic dignitaries and athletes, as well as for common citizens like you and me, to travel to and from the village of Whistler.

The point we must not miss is this: **the great highway John the Baptist was building was one of repentance**. John was saying, "Mend not only your roads, but your lives" (William Barclay, Luke, 1956, p. 27). This is not only something for government leaders, but for all of us, to consider. To put it in terms of BC geography, the trees (the beautiful, but now unfortunately, obstructive trees) need to be cleared off; the big boulders need to be located and removed; the huge hills need to be flattened, and the deep dips need to be filled in all the way of the centre median of **Highway One**, from Langley to Vancouver, so that our automotive vehicles will have another lane and easier access into and egress out of the city. Similarly, repentance will clear all the obstacles out of the way ahead so Jesus Christ can have full access into our hearts and lives. You see repentance invites the fullness of God to come and to live in us. And repentance is a constantly opening, freeing process. Note again the final line of Isaiah's words: "... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." When God's people live repentantly, it opens the way for the entire world to get to know him. Therefore, if we would only repent of our individual and corporate sins – our materialism, our insularity and our lovelessness – **a better highway** would be forged to our lost world, and many more might repent and come to Christ.

Now, as I've already mentioned, John's preaching brought a vast response as multitudes came out to the Jordan Valley for baptism. **John was surely gratified by the response, but he wasn't entirely pleased.** He sensed that some were insincere, and some were even hardened hypocrites. Some had simply come to see the show. Some were religious groupies who just wanted to be part of the scene. Some had come to criticize. And some who were even more calculating had undergone baptism so their friends would think well of them or perhaps so business connections would be cemented. It's no different today, people want to join the church with mixed motives, so we have to make careful inquiry and offer adequate instruction.

Even so John the Baptist wisely became very directive in his preaching.

2. **John's preaching: an authentic baptism** (Lk. 3:7-14).

First, **John became stridently eschatological** – that is, he warned the multitudes about the final judgment. The Bible says that “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?’” (Lk. 3:7). He wanted to make them aware that there was to be a final judgment and that they had better be prepared for it. “Even now,” he said, “the axe is lying at the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Lk. 3:9). He wanted to expose any hypocrisy and hardness of heart.

Secondly, **John became highly personal** -- he said, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Lk. 3:8a). Don't think you can presume on your connection with Abraham (Lk. 3:8b), or in other words, don't presume on your connection with your clan or your church. Anybody can claim to be part to a certain privileged group, but repentance will take more than that.

Jesus would later say the same thing, “By their fruits you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:16a). **True repentance produces the fruit of character:** “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (gal. 5:22b-23). **Then it also produces the fruit of action.**

Evidently, some of the people who came to John thought their **ethnic privileges** would save them. He knew that some of them said, “We have [the godly patriarch] Abraham as our ancestor” (Lk. 3:8b). Yet, as far as John was concerned, that was insufficient. He figured these kinds of people weren't in line for a blessing, let alone “a baptism of repentance.”

In effect he was saying to them, “Don’t think God won’t have a people to bless if he cuts you off. He can create faithful people out of the very stones beneath your feet if he wishes” (Lk. 3:8c). As far as he was concerned -- even as Jesus would later likewise be similarly concerned -- “Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God” (Jn. 8:31-47, especially 8:47).

So John struck a mighty blow at the common delusion that a connection with a particular “righteous” group of people will save our souls. Thousands in every age have believed that **association with the godly** will make them acceptable with God. But faith in **blood ties or church membership** has led whole generations to destruction. Sometimes, all a prominent name or lineage will get you, apart from grace, is greater judgment. “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees ...” (Lk. 3:9a).

What a terrible warning this is to those who have only a façade of belief, repentance or goodness. Sadly, it is all too easy to fool pastors or fellow church members or friends. But, one thing is for sure -- no one can fool God.

Thank God, John’s prophetic heart **wasn’t controlled by a desire for popularity**. He was free from the fear of appropriately offending others. Sometimes, folks, we need to speak clearly and bluntly. In fact, to be charitable when Christ is not, to be silent when Christ speaks, is actual “treachery to [people’s] souls” (J. C. Ryle). Thank God, John’s eschatological and personal charge indeed chilled some souls. They realized they had not truly repented. They saw they had no Spirit-derived fruit. They saw that their thoughts, their desires, and their actions belied the faith they professed with their lips.

So, thirdly, when the crowds asked him, “**What then should we do?**” (Lk. 3:10a), **John became totally ethical** -- he offered them a few detailed examples of what repentance might look like. His answer to them was somewhat surprising. He didn’t ask them to do something penitential -- “Go and perform four acts of random kindness in your community”, or ecclesiastical -- “Commit yourself to your local synagogue,” or even devotional -- “Pray through the psalms.” All of these, of course, are good things to do. But John asked them to engage **specific ways of changing** how they treated their fellow human beings.

It's significant, perhaps, that **all three suggestions John offered to them have to do with money and possessions**. Private citizens are to share with others, tax collectors are not to take more than is proper, and soldiers are not to extort money (Lk. 3:11-14). Through John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit is telling us that the way we hold on to our money and material blessings in relationship to others is a good indicator of the authenticity and health of our spiritual lives. Therefore, we must understand that high among the observable fruit that is "in keeping with repentance" (Lk. 3:8 NIV) is a giving, generous spirit. Not a bad message to all of us in Advent, the days of preparing the way, of clearing the way ahead, for Jesus Christ, God with us, God within us, Emmanuel.

Do we want to have an accurate evaluation of the state of our spirituality? Here are some biblical tests: Are we generous with our possessions? Do we share our homes, our cars, our clothing, and whatever else we have with others – joyfully? Or are we loath to share? Do we always push for more and then grasp it more and more tightly? Do we enjoy giving to family, friends, and most significantly to those in need? As someone has said, "Nobody gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor" (James Forbes). Further, do we give regularly and sacrificially to the Lord's work? One of the greatest reasons Christians like to give gifts to others and to their church is because they are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ who "gave himself for us" (Gal. 2:20), and who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Those who have repented and whose lives are **an open, inviting highway** for the Lord give of their resources, substance and time to others. Moreover, they live in a constant Holy Spirit-directed spirit of repentance. They repent of selfishness, impatience, meanness, harshness, coldness, prejudice, jealousy, pride and much more. These people live in the refreshing air of the forgiveness of their sins. They are guilt-free. They are clear-eyed. Their countenances and lives are an invitation to all to tread the highway of God's salvation and glory.

Amen

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 December 6, 2009 -- Advent II