

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and 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. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What, then, should we do?" ¹¹ In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ 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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 3:1-18

12/15/2024 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Repent"

Pastor Amy Terhune

A mother tells a story about her son who is a West Virginia state trooper. Once he stopped a woman for going 15 miles an hour over the speed limit. After he handed her a ticket, she asked him, "Don't you give out warnings?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied. "They're posted at regular interval all along the road. They say, 'Speed Limit 55.'" [Contributed by Patricia Greenlee to "All In a Day's Work." Cited in *Monday Fodder*. As used in "A Voice in the Wilderness" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

That's a fair point, I'd say. How many warnings does a person need that one is supposed to do what's right and follow the rules? I wonder if that state trooper ever got frustrated. I know that Jesus did when people didn't get it, and I suspect that John the Baptist did also. He certainly can be seen as

an old crank, but that's where we start today. There he is, out in the desert dressed in camel hair – and when I say camel hair, it's likely the carcass, not a fine camelhair suitcoat. He's munching on grasshoppers, his hair sticking out in every direction, smelling like a combination of body odor and wet dog, bellowing out his one and only sermon. What are we to do with this man? He's certainly doesn't seem to fit with the season, does he? Have we ever encountered a crèche scene or a Christmas Pageant that includes John the Baptist? While all around us, songs are wafting through the air about peace on earth and goodwill to humankind, John is crying out shrilly "Repent!"

But we dare not ignore him anymore than we dare ignore speed limit signs on the highway. John is advent all the way. All four gospels draw him to our attention, and figure him prominently as the herald before the Christ. Luke makes a point of noting the power players—Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea. Then there's Herod, the ruler of Galilee; and Herod's brother Philip and Lysanias, who rule over surrounding territories. And then there's Annas and Caiaphas, High Priests in Jerusalem's temple. And then there's real power. Overlooking all these prominent figures, the word of God comes to John in the wilderness. Why John? He lacks any kind of social grace or political savvy. The crowd comes out to the wilderness to hear his message and receive Baptism, and he calls them a brood of vipers—hardly flattering. I wonder how far I'd get if I started hurling insults as those who came to hear my message?

But he must be reckoned with.

Recently, I came across instructions from 1962 for a Honda Motorcycle. Perhaps you'll find them helpful:

- 1) At the rise of the hand by Policeman, stop rapidly. Do not pass him by or otherwise disrespect him.
- 2) When a passenger of the foot, hooves in sight, tootle the horn trumpet melodiously at first. If he still obstacles your passage, tootle him with vigor and express by word of mouth, warning hi hi.
- 3) Beware of the wandering horse that he shall not take fright as you pass him. Do not explode the exhaust box at him. Go smoothly by.
- 4) Give big space to the festive dog that makes sport in roadway. Avoid entanglement of dog with wheel spokes.
- 5) Go soothingly on the grease mud, as there lurks the skid demon. Press the brake foot as you roll around corners and save the collapse and tie up.

So now you know precisely how to ride a motorcycle. We chuckle at goofy instructions like these, but it's no laughing matter when it comes to life. Fortunately, John is quite clear: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." John may be an old crack and slightly off kilter, but he lays out for us exactly what is expected. He gives us very pragmatic and sensible instructions for preparing the Way of the Lord in our hearts, and it goes like this: Repent!

Now I know what you're thinking, because I've thought it myself. Repentance is not a very 'Christmasy' theme. Who wants to hear about repentance? Leave it for Lent, pastor. Once a year is more than enough. We want a cute baby and shining star and a choir of angels, right? Glory to God in the Highest. Peace on earth. Goodwill to all. But here's the honest truth, friends. It's awfully hard to know the joy of Emmanuel, God-With-Us, if we've made no effort to make room for God within us. Repentance is about fresh starts! Listen to how Lori Wagner puts it:

"While in the Hebrew scriptures, the idea of repentance involves "turning back" toward God, in the Greek New Testament, the word metanoia typically means to "change your mind," to make a complete "re-set," to leave your past condition behind and to re-condition your brain toward living a different future. It involves putting your mind and heart in the condition of being prepared to receive God's

grace. It's a profound commitment to align with God's will for your life." [from "God on the Move" by Lori Wagner, www.Sermons.com.] Repentance is life-giving.

Last week, the CEO of United Health Car – a guy named Brian Thompson – was shot to death in in the early morning hours in New York City by a relatively wealthy young man who had never been insured by that company, but who has, reportedly, suffered from chronic pain for years. I find myself baffled by this case. In some circles, this kid is being lauded as a hero. I saw a gleeful meme on social media the other day celebrating that fact that American CEOs are hiding out and hiring security – that they might finally understand what American schoolchildren feel as the head to school each day. And I thought to myself: Wrong direction. Nobody should feel that!! Not schoolchildren or CEOs. Now, there's not a person in this room who doesn't know that things are wrong with the American medical system. I get that. And we should be angry about it. Nobody should go bankrupt treating cancer! Nobody should waste away at home exhausting their caregivers because they can't afford skilled care. It's a moral issue. But let me say this as clearly as I can: we cannot shoot our way to justice. Time and time again, when Jesus was baited to use violence to achieve his goals, he would NOT bite! He turned over a few tables, rattled a few cages, leveled some harsh criticism, but the only blood he ever shed was his own. How can we hope to create a compassionate world if we rely on brutality to get there? How can we hope to foster humane systems if we dehumanize others to the point that we'll kill, cage, and coerce? We need to reform healthcare. We also need to take another look at how we celebrate a culture of violence and aggression. Repent. Re-set. Re-condition. Re-birth. Renew. Change the premise, and the results will be altered, too. But it starts in the wilderness, one life, one heart, one mind, one person at a time.

I suspect that several of you out there know the mission statement of the United Methodist Church. We exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That's why the United Methodist Church is here. That's our purpose. We transform the world. How? By making disciples of Jesus Christ? How do we do that? It starts with repentance. For sin, certainly.

Did you know that every kind of sin listed in scripture comes back to the dehumanization of others? Greed prioritizes stuff over people. Lust dehumanizes others for the purpose of sexual gratification. Gluttony is waste and overconsumption when others are in desperate need. Envy is selfish, wanting what another possesses to the point that the other no longer has value. Arrogance or Pride is egotistical, inflating the value of self. Sloth is moral laziness – apathy or complete and utter indifference to another's plight. And Wrath or Malice is pure and simple hatred, which always reduces the other to worthless in our judgement. The thing we don't realize is that when we dehumanize others, we dehumanize ourselves as well. We sever connection, and this causes harm to everyone. When we repent our sin, we are, in effect, asking God to restore our humanity.

There's a reason that John tells his listeners share with others. Your coat, your food, your stuff. And there's a reason John tells his listeners to serve faithfully. In whatever our role, do it ethically, honestly, with equity and honor. These are tangible signs of a changed life – one that values others, one that trusts God, one at peace with oneself.

Because in repentance we don't just turn away from sin. We turn to something. Or more accurately, to someone. One is coming, John says. One that will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. One is coming who will change this world by changing us. One is coming who sees our value, our worth, our potential, our best, our light. One is coming who redeems. The danger we constantly face is that we can know a lot about God, and not know God. Jesus invites us to an experience, a relationship, a connection.

"Many years ago, a cynical newspaper reporter was conducting an in-depth study of a Roman Catholic order of Nuns working in Paris. The hard-bitten reporter—Pierre Giraud—was convinced that

the good works, the loving philanthropy, the apparent tenderness of these women was just a cover for obtaining financial support for their institution. He asked if he might accompany one of the Nuns during a typical day. She took him down some of the most dilapidated streets he had ever seen. In the basement of one house was a man who was terminally ill. The newspaper reporter had reported on the grim conditions of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe, but what he saw that day in Paris left an indelible impression. The dirt and smell were overpowering. Vermin scurried away as they approached. The sick man who was lying on a bundle of rags was indescribably dirty. He was trembling. His condition was the product of poverty, disease, alcohol and drugs. The Nun rolled up her sleeves picked up a bowl, filled it with water from a tap upstairs and began to wash him. Suddenly the sick man jerked up. "Sister", he whimpered, "I am frightened." Giraud later wrote, "I stared in unbelief as I saw this refined, cultured woman take that filthy wreck of a man and hold him in her arms like a baby. For a suspended moment in time, that hovel became heaven because love was there." He was overwhelmed by the goodness that he saw. That was a repentance moment for Pierre Giraud. But it was also an empowering moment. He abandoned cynicism as something was born within him.

"The world has no answer to the Godly life. The only appropriate answer is to try and find the secret of it, imitate it, and invite others to come to know it themselves. [2 ¶]s adapted from "Prepare The Way" by Brett Blair and Staff, www.Sermons.com.] So let me ask this: do you understand the difference between knowing about God and knowing God? I can disciple followers of Jesus Christ. I can teach scripture and theology. I can provide outlets for service and witnessing. I can offer sacraments as a means of grace, and worship that has depth and meaning. I can set the conditions for us to encounter God. But only you can repent. Only you can decide to ask Jesus Christ into your life, into your heart. Only you can ask God to transform you. And only you can decide if God will prepare the way this Advent through the influence of your life. It starts in the wilderness, one life, one heart, one mind, one person at a time. One is coming. And he can indeed transform the world. But only if you and I can open ourselves to letting Jesus Christ transform our life, our heart, our mind, our world first. One is coming. Are you ready?

Amen.