

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Confident Preparations”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Advent 2--December 9, 2018

Lessons: Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist is something of an obstacle in our walk towards Christmas. Every second Sunday in the Advent season, when we've begun to decorate and shop and plan, here at church and at home; when Santa can be found smiling and listening with children on his lap in many a mall and shopping center; when the parties have begun, and the special lights turned on at Longwood Gardens and the Yuletide display at Winterthur, we in the church get jarred, startled, surprised, even scared by the arrival of John. We were getting ready for Bethlehem, for the baby, for the shepherds, angels, and the wise guys, when suddenly the tape is put on fast forward and we find ourselves alongside the Jordan River with John proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Any good movie editor would be able to tell you that you can't go from a pregnant woman in one scene to a grown up child some thirty years old in the very next scene. It is too disjointed, but that is exactly what we do.

John makes me a little uncomfortable. He has only one volume for speaking and it is loud. He reminds me of a pushy evangelist, the kind who like to force-feed you Jesus; Bible-thumpers, who ask if you been saved, and explain that you're headed straight for hell if you don't repent right now. And they tend to be the only ones who can tell you exactly how to repent and will judge if you have done it the right way. But actually, that is not what John was like.

Some prophets like to work in the city, to stand in your way, so that you have to cross the street to get past them. They almost dare you to ignore them, and when you do, they then can proclaim your doom. But that wasn't John.

In the gospel lesson today, John is introduced with an awful lot of detail: In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler in Galilee and his brother Philip ruler in the nearby region, and Annas and Caiaphas were high priests...you wonder when Luke will get on with the story. It is more information than any of us need to know. Which should make you ask, why is it there? Why does Luke take so much time to describe the religious and political situation before introducing John?

It is not that he had a thirty-page essay to write and was padding it with minutiae. It was not that he was a big name dropper. He wasn't trying to tell you that he had met any of these important people. Part of the reason is that Luke was an amateur historian, so from time to time you will get these little historical facts. But more than that, Luke is providing a list of the people who seem to be in charge, who even think they are in charge. But then, surprise! In the midst of the status quo, Luke writes that the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John is not the Emperor, or the Governor, or the King or the High Priest. He isn't in Who's Who, frankly most people have no idea who he is, but it is to John that the word of God comes. And that word doesn't come in Rome, or Jerusalem, or any other seat of power; it comes in the wilderness.

This is one of the secrets that we like to keep hidden in church. Yes, we have worship here and there is lots of good that goes on here inside our churches. However, we are also called out, out into the wilderness where people live and struggle and suffer and rejoice and mourn and weep and die. Out in the wilderness we are invited to listen for crying voices that proclaim: Prepare the way of the Lord. Change the world. Make it the way God wants. If we only listen here in church for God's

voice, then we are going to miss a great part of the message. God doesn't just speak in here. God speaks out there too. We do not simply have something to teach our neighbors. We have something to learn from them too.

And the message is one of repentance. That makes many of us uncomfortable. It sounds difficult and it is. It sounds like a call to change, and it is. But, as Paul proclaims, the God who started a good work in us will bring it to completion. So don't be afraid of repentance, rather be confident. Too often repentance has been presented as recognizing how absolutely rotten and selfish and defective we are, which may be true, but may not be what we need to repent of. "True repentance," Frederick Buechner suggests, "spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying 'Wow!'"¹ What John offers to those who came out to him, using the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "is a chance to come clean, to stop pretending they were someone else and start over again, by allowing him to wash them off."² Doesn't that sound good? Our repentance allows us to begin again, to erase all the scars left by our own mistakes and failings. John wants to wash off all the nasty burdens we carry. That is what baptism is about, that's what repentance is about. John preaches repentance so that we won't miss the miracles that are yet to come, so that we will be ready for the arrival of Jesus who continues to arrive in our midst.

Here in the church we can let go of our past; we can lay down all that would keep us from being the people God created us to be. We can clear our hearts and eyes and minds, and then go out from here into the wildernesses of the world to listen for God's messengers who continue to speak today, and we can be confident in all our advent preparations because the one who started a good work in us will indeed bring it to completion.

Many years ago, someone suggested that every time a child is born it is a sign that God isn't yet through with the world. Repentance is a similar sign: we are allowed to come clean, to stop pretending, to begin again, to point to God and say "Wow!" God isn't finished with you yet.

In the wilderness a voice cries out: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Make the world what God wants it to be.

Let us pray: Open our ears, our eyes and our hearts, that we might hear your word spoken to us in the wilderness places of our lives and our world, that we might be prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, A Theological ABC. Harper & Row. © 1973

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Wherever the Way May Lead* in *Home By Another Way*. Cowley Publications. © 1999.