

What Should We Do?

Luke 3:1-6, 10-14

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.'" 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."

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Prepare the way of the Lord. Isaiah said it, John quoted him, and we just sang it. Prepare the way of the Lord. That's what Advent is all about, right? But what does it really mean to prepare the way of the Lord? According to John, we are to literally prepare the way, the road, for Christ. After all, roads in 1st century Israel left a lot to be desired. And that's when there were roads. People often traveled about through fields and on trampled-down grass that barely passed for a path. So John says, "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." If we are to take him literally, this is a pretty big public works project! But in that day and age, there would have been something to that. If there had been an interstate highway system, imagine how much further Jesus could have traveled. Imagine how many more people he could have reached.

But that doesn't mean much for us today. Bridges raise valleys, and tunnels level out mountains. If Jesus came to the developed world today, he wouldn't face any geographical obstacles to his message. But that's not to say that he would find his message easily accepted. The kinds of obstacles we have today are more personal and internal. Rather than preparing the way for the Lord to travel, we have to prepare the way for the Lord to enter our hearts.

So what are our obstacles? Well, we each have a different story to tell here. But there is a common denominator – sin. When I teach confirmation, I tell the kids that sin is defined as anything that separates us from God and from his beloved children. And I know that each of us here tries to live a good life. We try to do what God would want us to do. But it turns out, each of us still sins. And our sins are the obstacles that Jesus faces when he tries to reach us with his message. Our sins make it hard for us to let the Christ child be born anew in our hearts.

So how do we level out these obstacles? How do we get rid of our sins? John the Baptist tells us to repent. That’s a nice church-y sounding word, isn’t it? Repent. But what does it really mean, and how do we do it?

In Jewish tradition, there’s a great holiday just for repenting. It’s called Yom Kippur. It’s not a coincidence that it falls 10 days after the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah. We like to make a clean start of things at the beginning of the year. After the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, Jews take the next 10 days to examine themselves and their lives. The culmination of this is not a feast day, but rather a fast day.

On Yom Kippur, two goats were taken to the temple. One of the goats was ritually sacrificed, and it’s blood was thrown on the mercy seat, or the place at the very center of the temple where God was thought to sit. That’s right; goat’s blood on God’s La-Z-Boy. And what of the other goat? Well, the priest put his hand on that goat’s head, invoking all the sins the people had confessed. After transferring these sins to the goat, the goat was chased into the wilderness. This, of course, was symbolic of casting the sins out of the community. (This is also, by the way, where we get the term ‘scapegoat.’)

During the 10 days leading up to Yom Kippur, people increase their time for prayer, worship and devotion. It’s a time to get further from worldly concerns and to get closer to God

and holy matters. John the Baptist and his followers were part of this tradition. When someone talked about repentance, this is what they probably thought of. They understand the concept of wiping clean the slate of sin.

But John introduces to them a new way of repenting. Did you notice that three times, people ask him specifically what they should do to repent? John doesn't ask any of them to go to the temple. He doesn't mention priests, or prayers, or ritual sacrifice. Instead, he gives them practical assignments. And he gives them different assignments based on who they are and what resources they have.

First, the general crowd approaches him. What should we do? John tells them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." That's a pretty straight forward instruction. Then the tax collectors come forward. Remember, everyone hated the tax collectors. Not the way we talk about the IRS today taking all our money. Tax collectors in Rome were not paid by the government. They were responsible for collecting more money than was due to Rome – and that extra off the top was their salary. The problem was that most tax collectors took far more than they needed. So John tells them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." The third group to approach John is a surprise. Soldiers approached him, also asking what they should do. John tells them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." In other words, don't abuse your power and authority.

Scholar Veli-Mali Karkkainen points out that "For the Baptist, repentance had less to do with how fervently one prays or how faithfully one attends the worship service; instead, it had everything to do with how one handled riches, executed public service, and exercised stewardship." So we have a Jewish tradition of ritual and worship as a way of repenting. And we

have John the Baptist suggesting actions in the community as a way of repenting. Both of these forms are part of our tradition as United Methodists.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, talked about works of piety and works of mercy. Together, these works make up what we call means of grace. And what are the means of grace? They're the many ways that we come to know and feel God's presence and love. Works of piety are the ways we come to know God through worship and ritual. Prayer, communion, fasting, reading the Bible, etc. Works of mercy are essentially ways that we do good for others. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger, encouraging one another, etc. Wesley preached that Christians must participate in both works of piety and works of mercy in order to move on toward Christian perfection.

So what about us? What should we do? In Matthew 19, a young man asks Jesus the same thing. Let me read some of that passage to you.

Then someone came to him and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

That's interesting, isn't it? Jesus tells this man which commandments he should keep. I would have thought Jesus would tell him to keep them all! But instead, Jesus lifts up six of them. Interestingly, he lists the six that are related to community. The first four commandments, the ones related to worship, are not mentioned. So even though worship and works of piety are important, for this young man, Jesus feels it's more important to stress human relationships. And

when Jesus tells him to sell his possessions, that sounds like what John the Baptist is saying this morning. And it sounds like John Wesley's works of mercy.

So let me ask again, what about us? What should we do? We really shouldn't have to ask that question. Because if we're honest with ourselves, we know exactly what we should do. John and Jesus are not speaking in code this morning. The question we really have to ask ourselves is how we're going to do this. Or maybe, how much. You'll note that John tells the crowd to share what they have, not to give away everything they have. He doesn't ask the crowd to become homeless by caring for the homeless.

I think we sometimes forget that we don't have to end hunger or homelessness to make a difference. But we also can't just sit on our hands, thinking that we only have enough for ourselves. Some of us have two coats. Some of us have ten. Each of us has something extra we can share. For many of us, we have financial resources to share. We may not be millionaires, we may not be able to make extravagant charitable donations, but most of us do have disposable income. We get to make choices about how we spend our money.

This time of year, there's no shortage of groups and organizations asking for special donations. Thanksgiving helps us to be thankful for what we have, Christmas makes us feel generous, and of course there are tax benefits... But what John is saying this morning is that giving is about more than that. It's about more than helping people who have less. John says that when we share our resources, act fairly to one another, and maintain right relationships, we are preparing the way for Christ.

In confirmation last week, our lesson was on forgiveness. I told the kids that the first step in forgiveness is confession. You have to admit you've done something wrong. Then you have to repent, or turn away from your sin by doing whatever is possible to make amends. If you want to

prepare the way of the Lord, you can begin right here, right now. In a few minutes, when we come together for communion, we will share together a prayer of confession. I invite you to really think about the words of that prayer. Open your hearts to God. And consider how you can make your repentance real and visible by making amends. Maybe that means an apology to someone. Maybe it means sharing your financial resources. But whatever it is that you should do, I guarantee that it will help you prepare the way of our Lord. Amen and amen.