

## Luke 3:1-6

As I have mentioned before, I am a recovering Southern Baptist. Growing up, I always found it a source of pride that Jesus' cousin John was also Baptist. It wasn't until later that I learned that is not exactly what the Bible meant. John the *Baptizer* is probably a little closer. John the Dipper is actually the best rendering of the Greek, but that is a little too cheeky for most folks. Still, what John was doing was radical enough that he came to be known by that action. "Have you heard about John?" "Which one?" "The one who baptizes people." "Oh, yeah, him."

So what made what John was doing so noteworthy that it was his distinguishing mark? He was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Doesn't seem too outrageous, does it? Our baptist neighbors do it all the time. But in that time and at that place, it was radical. Everyone knew that forgiveness came from God through the Temple. There were elaborate rites and actions that were necessary in order to secure God's forgiveness. Everyone knew that. It was right there in the Scriptures, right?

Well, not exactly. The problem that the authorities had with John was not that he propounded forgiveness of sins as an innovation, but that he provided a means of appropriating it that was innovative. It created an ambiguous situation. John was saying that forgiveness came from God, and the Temple was, if not exactly superfluous, at least not a requirement. And it is important to note, John was doing nothing illegal, nothing contrary to biblical law, but there was at least a kind of territorial dispute. Jesus faced the same kind of objection in declaring God's forgiveness to the paralytic lowered through the roof.

The novelty of John's approach was that instead of having people wash themselves, symbolic of divine cleansing, John, himself, dipped people under the water and did it in the Jordan. Basically the rite functioned as an expression of willingness to change and to be prepared for change by receiving divine forgiveness. Baptism is submission to this new initiative. It is not simply change of the individual, but change of the individual in readiness for change of the world. Change of the world means transformation, liberation, freedom, salvation. The writer of Luke found in John what the writer of Isaiah had been talking about. John was the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord.

Isaiah uses imagery of a massive civil engineering project. "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 you have been through Leland lately, you have experienced what a project making smooth a path can be. This is one of those rare examples of biblical imagery that gets even easier to visualize in our modern world. In the first century, the Romans were building roads everywhere, generally using slave labor. But God doesn't want mindless slaves doing his bidding. God wants a free people giving of themselves. That is where we come in.

But we need to be careful here. It is very easy, and very tempting, to read this bit of Luke and, because it is talking about repentance, make the assumption that getting rid of sin is the necessary prep work. Tempting because then we can use it as an excuse for not doing anything. I'm not good enough to work for the Lord. How

can I go out and work to further God's kingdom when there is so much wrong with me? Who am I that God can use me? I'll just hang back and try not to cause any trouble.

That won't work. First of all, the Bible is full of stories of God using miserable sinners just like you and me to further God's kingdom. So you are not off the hook. Second of all, if our understanding of repentance is limited to just feeling bad about some sin or other, we miss out on something profound. Repentance is not to be confused with mere remorse, with feeling sorry for a wrong done. It is not a state but a stage, a beginning. It is an invitation to new life, an opening up of new horizons, the gaining of a new vision.

Christianity testifies that the past can be undone. It knows the mystery of forgiveness and regeneration, eschewing the fixed division between the "good" and the "wicked," the pious and the rebellious, the believers and the unbelievers. Indeed, "the last" can be "the first," the sinner can reach out to holiness. Passions are conquered by stronger passions; love is overcome by more abundant love. One repents not because one is virtuous, but because human nature can change, because what is impossible for man is possible for God.

The motive for repentance is at all times humility, un-self-sufficiency - not a means of justification for oneself, or of realizing some abstract idea of goodness, or of receiving a reward in some future life. Just as the strength of God is revealed in the extreme vulnerability of His Son on the Cross, so also the greatest strength of man is to embrace his weakness. St. Paul writes about this in his second letter to the Corinthians. "For my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I render glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

The Greek term for repentance, *metanoia*, denotes a change of mind, a reorientation, a fundamental transformation of outlook, of man's vision of the world and of himself, and a new way of loving others and God. In the words of a second-century text, The Shepherd of Hermas, it implies "great understanding," or discernment. It involves, that is, not mere regret of past evil but a recognition by man of a darkened vision of his own condition, in which sin, by separating him from God, has reduced him to a divided, autonomous existence, depriving him of both his natural glory and freedom. "Repentance," says Basil the Great, "is salvation, but lack of understanding is the death of repentance."

Our call to prepare the way of the Lord, is not about getting rid of sin in our lives, as if we could, but rather a change in our approach to our lives. Seeing beyond ourselves and our immediate needs to the glory of God's eternal kingdom, and the part we are invited to have in it, as heirs. The preparation is not making ourselves perfect, but being willing to be perfected in God's eternity. Repentance is not about regret; it is not even about change; it is about transformation. Being made new in Christ our Savior. And not for our sakes alone, but for the sake of the world. Because our salvation, our freedom, is not just about us individually, it is about us collectively. We seek to be transformed so that we may work to transform the world. We repent, not so much to clear the slate, but so that we may seek God. As we pray in our confession of sin, "forgive us that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways."

That is the nature of repentance. That we may see God more clearly. Not weighed down with our failures, but freed from our burdens. So that we may delight in the work God calls us to do. The question we face, then, is whether we are ready to answer the call of that voice in the wilderness. Are we ready to open ourselves up to God's will and God's ways, so that through us, all flesh may, indeed, see the salvation of God? May God grant us the grace to answer "We will, with God's help." In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*