

## Prepare the Way

Luke 3:1-6

Rev. Dan Schumacher

Please pray with me:

*Holy God –*

*who comes to us and meets us where we are,*

*even if it isn't where we ought to be:*

*meet us today, in the person of John the Baptizer,*

*so that through him our hearts might be prepared for you.*

*Through Christ, our Lord, amen.*

Well, we know it's advent, because that's when our crazy cousin, John the Baptist, always comes for a visit.

You know, scripture almost never gives a physical description of someone – unless, that is, the person's appearance or sense of fashion is so strange that it made them stand out. Scripture describes John the Baptist's appearance – clothed with camel's hair and a leather belt around his waste. His eclectic tastes stretched beyond just fashion. He ate locusts and wild honey. It's sometimes suggested that he might be a Nazirite, like Samson in Old Testament, so perhaps he had also taken the Nazirite vow not to drink wine or cut his hair.

Which means, all in, John the Baptist is one awkward guest at the Thanksgiving table. He wears funny clothes. He doesn't cut his hair. And instead of turkey, he just wants a bowl full of grasshoppers.

And we just want to get through one holiday meal without having to hear another one of his conspiracies about how the world is coming to an end, but John just can't help himself. We've barely said grace when he starts in: "I am telling you, the ax is at the root for this old world! We are about to go through the refiners fire!" His eyes are wide as he says it. He really believes it's true.

The Episcopal priest, John Morris, writes about a memorable moment in an American Literature class. First, his professor talked to the class about Emily Dickinson – a quiet, reclusive woman who lived a calm, unassuming life in Amherst, Massachusetts.

And then the professor talked about Walt Whitman – a Brooklyn resident and the "wild man" of American poetry. If you've ever seen a photo of Whitman, you might have guessed that he was a Nazirite, too, because, I promise you, no razor ever touched that man's head or face. His hair and beard made Einstein look clean-cut. Whitman's energy, sensuality, and wide experiences were dramatically different from those of Emily Dickinson.

The professor then offered two facts. One: the Dickinson family occasionally went to the beach for picnics. And, two: Walt Whitman was fond of going to the beach, stripping off all of his clothes, and running in the sand while yelling his poetry into the wind.

“So,” the professor asked, “what if, one day at the same beach, just after Emily Dickinson had finished spreading her picnic blanket on the sand, suddenly flying over a sand dune and landing right in the middle of the Dickinson picnic came a naked Walt Whitman. What a surprise that would have been! And who would have spoken first? And what would that person have said? And what poems would each of them have written afterwards? What a moment it would have been for American poetry!”

John the Baptist is Walt Whitman landing on the beach. A wild, surprising character shouting prophecy in the wilderness — *howling* his message into the wind. John shocked a lot of people.

And that’s kind of the point.

It’s hard to continue with your picnic, let alone go on with business as usual, once John has burst onto the scene. Because he interrupts our normal way of thinking about how things get done in this world.

Luke puts it something like this:

“In the fourth year of the presidency of Joseph R. Biden, when Ron DeSantis was governor of Florida, Gavin Newsom was governor of California, and Greg Abbot was Governor of Texas; when Eric Adams was the embroiled mayor of New York City; during the papal leadership of Pope Francis, the word of the Lord came to *none of them*, but to a ‘nobody’ from ‘nowhere’ — a guy named, John.”

A former professor of mine at Princeton, Luke Powery, said it like this: “It’s like Luke was saying ‘na-na-na-na boo-boo’ to all those who thought they could control God.”

What Luke is trying to make clear to us is that God’s message bypassed all those in the halls of power and, instead, came to this fire-brand in the desert; this weirdo in the wilderness; this one who didn’t have the right credentials or work experience or resume — who didn’t even have a seminary degree or teach a Sunday School class.

God’s word came to *him*, and that alone ought to give us *hope*, because it means that God just might speak to regular, everyday folk like you and me, too.

As Luke and the other gospels tell it, John came as:

“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 made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and *all flesh* shall see the salvation of God.” (Luke 3:4-6).

There are things in the way, says John, things that stand between you and a heart ready to receive God. There are deep valleys and high places and crooked roads. There is work to be done if you’re going to be ready.

The Presbyterian pastor, Kimberly Wagner says it like this:

“As a child, I was always in awe of how frenetic my mother would get when we were expecting out-of-town guests. She would spend days cleaning the house and bugging dad to fix all those little things he had been putting off. She would spend hours baking and cooking, dusting and mopping corners of the house I didn’t even know you could dust or mop.

My sister and I would joke during those times that if you didn’t get out of the way, she would vacuum you up or throw you in a trash bag. It was when company would come that my sister and I would be charged with raking the leaves in the yard or helping my dad clean out the garage. ‘They aren’t going to sleep in the garage!!’ I would protest. ‘Why does *it* need to be cleaned?’

But this is how my mother prepared for company – she would clean out all the old and open space for company to feel welcomed by laying out her best – the best linens, the best food, the most pristine house possible. Mom taught us to live in anticipation of those who are about to show up. To change our patterns and ways in order to make space for the newness that was about to show up” (“Showing Up,” *day1.org*, December 8, 2024).

As Luke tells it, *that* is what John the Baptist was about – saying to us, get a broom and get sweeping, because our hearts need to be cleaned up if they’re going to be ready for when the Messiah arrives.

And John said that the best way to clean your heart up and make room, to clean out the old and make space for the new was *to repent*. He came “proclaiming a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3).

Now, if you’re like me, then maybe the word, “*repent*,” has a negative connotation to it. At its best, it means something like: “I have been discovered; I have been found out; I have been uncovered; I got caught – and now I’m expected to eat crow and make this right.” There’s nothing fun about being caught red-handed, is there?

That’s at its best. At its worst, it’s come to mean that God is always angry with me and just looking for a reason to punish me – so every time I mess up I look over my shoulder, expecting another blow. And so, my worry is that the word *repent* is something that makes us feel very fearful – like we aren’t just *in* the wrong, but that *we*

are wrong — from top-to-bottom and inside-out, and that God is just looking for a reason to pull off the belt.

And, honestly, how can we not be somewhat fearful of the word, repentance, when John says things like, “Even now, the axe is at the root! You better bear fruit before you get chopped down and thrown in the fire...I come baptizing with water, but he comes with *fire*. The winnowing fork is in his hand...” (Luke 3:7ff).

How can you not feel threatened when the image of God we’re given is God holding the axe at the root of your life, lining it up for the next chop?

What John gets right is this: there are things in our lives that do get in the way of our being ready to welcome and receive God. We do need to do some work to level out the high and low places; to straighten out the crooked places and smooth out the rough places. That is hard, but necessary work — work for which we need to take personal responsibility.

But what John seems to get wrong is his image of God. He says that God is like a lumberjack, with axe in hand, ready to chop us down as fuel for the fires of hell.

But in this same book of the Bible, Jesus gives a very different image of God. He tells the story of a shepherd who had a flock of a hundred sheep, but having lost one of them, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine, in order to find the *one*. And when he found that one, he stooped down and lifted that one onto his shoulders and carried that one back home. And when he got back, the shepherd called all his friends and all his neighbors and threw party to celebrate the retrieval of that *one* little lost sheep. And Jesus says that *that* is an image of who God is and how God *feels* when one lost sheep *repents*.

Now, how’s that for an image of repentance and divine judgment? Not of a God who says, “Get back here or I’ll chop you down,” but of a God who comes out to find us and meets us where we are — even if its not where we ought to be — and gently guides us back home.

How different would we feel about the word, repentance, if that was the first image that came to mind?

There’s a story that the great reformer, Martin Luther, used to tell about his own experience and misunderstanding of *repentance*.

He remembered a time, while as a young student at Erfurt, when he and several other boys were down in the town square, peeking through the window of the butcher’s shop coveting the delicious cuts of steak and ribs and bacon and hams and sausages, when all of a sudden the giant, apron-clothed butcher spotted them and ran out of his shop after them, chasing Luther and the other boys. He said he remembers the butcher was furiously waving sausages in the air as he chased them, but only later did he learn that

the butcher was chasing them with sausages because he was *eager to give them away*. But the boys mistook his enthusiasm for anger and ran in the opposite direction.

All of his life, Luther feared an angry, demanding God — one whose ax was at the root, so to speak — only to discover in the end that what God wanted was to love and forgive all along.

I think we make the same mistake as Martin Luther and John the Baptist before him — fearing God instead of seeing that what God really wants is to love us and forgive us.

Repentance, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is ultimately a *hope-filled* word, because, in the end, it assumes that real change is possible.

The word translated as *repentance* is the Greek word *metanoia*, which literally means, not to feel bad for a wrong committed, but simply to change one's mind, to turn around, to reorient one's self, to do a U-turn.

The New Testament scholar, Joel Green, says it like this: repentance is “a realignment of hearts and lives to God's agenda.” The poet, Scott Cairns says that repentance “turns not so much away, as toward” — not so much *away* from what we wish we hadn't done with our lives, but *toward* what we hope to do with them from now on.

So, John the Baptist was right *and* wrong all at the same time. He was wrong that God is standing up there like some cosmic lumberjack, just waiting for us to say the wrong thing, to do the wrong thing, and then — whack — we get a chop from God's celestial axe.

But he was right that there are things in our lives that hinder God from making it to our hearts. There are deep, dark valleys and arrogantly prideful high places. There are crooked places and rough, pot-hole strewn roads. We need to *repent* — which isn't so much about feeling bad about where we've been, but rather about inviting God to direct where we go from here forward.

There is this old, old story about a young man who had become convinced that he needed to know God better, so he set out on a spiritual pilgrimage. It wasn't far into the journey that he began to hear rumors about a strange, old hermit who lived up on the top of a lonely mountain where he communed with God. Convinced this hermit was the spiritual mentor he needed, the young man changed his course to find the lonely man. The journey was long and treacherous, but the young man was determined to know God better — so he endured.

When he finally arrived, to his great surprise, he found the old hermit sitting in silent meditation. Rather than interrupt him, the young man decided to follow in his new rabbi's steps, so he joined him in silent meditation. But after three long days, the young man's zeal finally got the best of him and he broke the silence.

“Old man,” he asked, “what exactly is it that you do up here?”

The old man, without even opening his eyes, responded, “I wrestle with God.”

“Really – you wrestle with God? Old man, do you hope to win?”

And for the first time, the old hermit broke from his meditation, opened his eyes, and met the boy’s gaze with this own.

“No, son, I hope to lose.”

That is perhaps the best definition I know for what it means to repent. It means that when it comes to the place in our lives where we find ourselves wrestling with God that we hope to lose.

“Prepare the way,” says John the Baptizer.

We do it best when we hope to lose.

Amen.