

"Prepare The Way Of The Lord!" (Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6)

The first Sundays of the Season of Advent always call us to focus on John the Baptist. And I think it's probably fair to say that most of us regard him kinda like the yucky tasting medicine we have to swallow to get better. We've learned that we just have to put up with and get past John the Baptist in order to get to the warm, fuzzies of Christmas.

So let's hear what John the Baptist has to say to us today from the lectionary on this second Sunday of Advent. And maybe, if we listen closely to the wild, sackcloth wearing, locust eating wilderness man, we'll understand why we can't get to Christmas without encountering John the Baptist.

The first thing we hear from John's mouth is that we need to "Repent!" No wonder John's not our favorite person. To shout at us that we need to repent does not endear him to us, does it? It makes us feel like we're being accused of something horrible and judged guilty. But this is our immediate reaction because we've seen too many Elmer Gantry-like movies. We hear the word "repent" and we automatically think of the minister pounding his Bible, preaching fire and brimstone, telling us that we better watch out or we're 're going to go straight to hell.

But I do not think that this is the true interpretation of the word. After all, Jesus also told us to repent, and I certainly don't picture Jesus shouting at us, trying to make us feel guilty, trying to intimidate us, trying to frighten us, do you?

The call to repent is most accurately understood as a call for a change of heart and conduct, a call to turn our lives around, to turn from a life of rebelling against God to a life of obeying God.

Now most of us probably don't think of ourselves as rebels. We think of James Dean as a rebel. We think of teenagers as rebels, not wanting to listen to their parents, wanting to do what they want to do when they want to do it. We don't think of ourselves that way. We're mature and, for the most, part listen to others and conform with society.

But if we're honest with ourselves, when it comes to God, we do tend to be rebels. Just as a teenager tends to do what he wants to do instead of what his parent wants him to do, so too we tend to do what we want to do instead of what God, our heavenly parent, wants us to do.

For example, God wants us to forgive, but we're not going to ever forgive so-and-so. God wants us to give a tithe or a tenth to his church, trusting that he loves us and will take care of us, but we're not going to put ourselves at risk. God wants us to turn the other cheek when someone wrongs us or hurts us, but we're not about to do anything that foolish! God wants us to love our neighbor as ourselves, but we want to do like everyone else and just look out for number one. God expects us to love our enemies, but when we hear this, we really turn our backs on God. And so on and so forth. We must admit that the examples of our rebellion, doing what we want to do, instead of what God wants us to do, are endless.

No wonder the Prophet Malachi asked the question, "Who will be able to present herself or himself as spotless and clean when God suddenly comes to his Temple?" And the answer is, "No one." As Paul wrote in Romans 3, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside" (Romans 3:10-12). But.....to repent is to turn toward God.

The call to repent is really a call for a change of heart and conduct, a call to turn our lives around, to turn from a life of rebelling against God to a life of obeying God. And this is a call that a modern John the Baptist echoes. Billy Graham has said, "We're suffering from only one disease in the world. Our basic problem is not a race problem. Our basic problem is not a poverty problem. Our basic problem is not a war problem. Our basic problem is a heart problem. We need to get the heart changed, the heart transformed."

But on our own, we can't do this. So after telling us that we need to repent, John the Baptist tells us how we can repent, how we can change our heart and conduct. And in typical Jewish fashion, John does this by giving us an image to take into our minds and hearts, an image that was used by an earlier prophet, the Prophet Isaiah.

We are told that we need to "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" (Luke 3:4-6). Yes, in true Jewish fashion, this image is given us, a picture for us to visualize.

The image is that of a king who wants to come visit his people. To make his visit possible, though, he asks his people to prepare the way for him, to clean up

anything that might prevent him from making his way to them, to fix the potholes and clear away the brambles. The king wants to come visit so much that he wants the people to do whatever it takes to make his visit to them happen--even if it means filling valleys, making mountains and hills low, straightening out crooked roads, and smoothing out rough roads.

No wonder John with this message stands at the beginning of this season. He tells us that our King is coming. Our King is coming because he wants to bless us with his presence, so that he can save us by changing our hearts and our conduct, helping us live a better way. But in order for him to come to us, we need to get rid of all the obstacles that might keep him from actually reaching us and entering our lives.

John urges us to consider, What are the mountains in our lives that could keep God from being a part of our lives? What are the valleys in our lives that could be keeping him away? What are the crooked roads and the rough roads that keep God from being with us? Whatever they are, we would be wise to try to fix them. This is the preparation we are to be doing during this season. The season is not about preparing our physical houses, decorating them, buying and putting wrapped gifts under our trees. Rather, the season is about preparing our spiritual houses and the roads that lead to them.

There was a man who lived out in the countryside. Every year the road in front of his house kept getting worse and worse, with more potholes all the time. The fellow kept calling up the highway department to complain. But nothing ever seemed to happen. But finally, after the man kept calling for months on end, the highway department did do something about his problem. They put up a sign in front of his house that said: "Caution—Rough Road Ahead." The road never got fixed. So too many people complain about not feeling God's presence with them, not getting more out of church or prayer, not feeling peace, joy, or love in their lives. But they're not doing the work necessary to make room for God in their lives--to help God come into their lives--to welcome God into their lives--to be hospitable to God.

We love the idea of God being Emmanuel, God With Us. But if Emmanuel is to be more than just a beautiful thought, if God With Us is to be a reality, we have to fix those roads in our lives that are blocking God's way into our lives. We have to have the courage and the determination to chip away at some habit that's hurting us, some way of behaving that's damaging our relationships with those we love, some way of thinking that's keeping us and God apart.

Ernest Gordon, at one time chaplain at Yale University, wrote a book called Through the River of the Kwai in which he shared his experiences as a prisoner of war, during World War II. He wrote about the degradation, desolation, hopelessness he and the other men felt. He said that he and the other prisoners were angry at God for what had happened to them. But then something happened which allowed God to reach the men. It was Christmas 1944, and in one of the thatched huts with dirt floors where the prisoners slept, one soldier began to sincerely sing a Christmas carol. It echoed over the infirmary where men were dying. Then all around the camp, the men began to sing, and those who could, those who could walk, came to the field outside the huts and sat in a big circle. Gordon wrote, "God touched us that day." But God was able to get through to the men that day because they had finally knocked down the mountain of anger and leveled the valley of despair, opening themselves to God's presence, allowing Emmanuel to reach them.

Then there's the story of Al Johnson, a Kansas man who wanted to have a closer relationship with God. So Al Johnson was willing to do the road-cleaning required for God to draw closer to him. He confessed to a bank robbery he had participated in when he was 19 years old. The statute of limitations had run out, but Johnson voluntarily repaid his share of the stolen money (*Today In the Word*, April, 1989, p. 13).

And remember Terry Anderson, the journalist who was held as a hostage in Lebanon for 2,454 days? Terry Anderson had been raised in the Catholic Church, but he hadn't been a practicing Catholic for years. But the Bible was given to him during his captivity. He said it came to him as a gift from heaven. He read, and thus began some road work. He pondered his life, doing a little more road work. He began a litany of confession in his mind. He confessed that he had hurt his first wife and daughter. He had made many mistakes. He had been a very arrogant person. He wasn't sure that people liked him much. He wasn't sure he liked himself very much. This honest assessment of his life did a lot of road cleanup. Later in the first year of his captivity Anderson became aware that other hostages were living next door. One was a priest. Father Lawrence Jenco. Anderson asked his captors if he could see the priest. "I am a Catholic," he told them. "I want to make a confession." His wish was granted, and Father Jenco was allowed to come to Anderson's room. Anderson hardly knew where to begin. It had been 25 years since he had made his last confession. There was much to confess. A bad marriage. Chasing women. Drinking. Anderson found it a very emotional experience. By the time he finished, he and Father Jenco were both in tears. Father Jenco placed his right hand on Anderson's head and said, "In the name of a gentle, loving God, you are

forgiven." Terry Anderson's faith deepened immensely in his hostage years. His heart and his conduct changed, and he lived in peace, joy, and love, all because he had done the hard work of preparing the way of the Lord into his life, welcoming God into his life.

I like the way a preacher named David Leininger (*One Shock after Another*) put it. He said, "Perhaps we would do well to say let every heart get out the bulldozers and backhoes, the rock crushers and road graders. There are mountains that need to come down--mountains of racism, sexism, ageism, and any other "-ism" that blocks our way to healthy relationships with one another and with our Lord. There are valleys to be filled--valleys of depression, despair, loneliness, grief, pain, any of which can keep us from the rich relationship the Savior offers and that keep us from enjoying the fellowship of the faith. There are crooked places to be made straight--yes, there is perversity, even among those we might never imagine; fine exteriors mask rotten interiors of abuse, neglect, immorality, even violence. There are rough places to be made smooth--rough places that have come because of oppression and injustice. There is work to do! Bring on the heavy equipment!"

My friends, if we want God to come into our lives, then we need to get ready. We need to prepare.

"Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth." So be it for each of us. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; December 6, 2009