

The Prophet's Voice

Luke 3:1-6

December 6, 2009

I.

Today's Gospel gives us a lot of background, but its point is very short. It begins with a history lesson about the names of Roman political leaders and Jewish high priests. Then it ends with a quote from the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, who said that a voice would cry out in the wilderness proclaiming the coming of the Lord (40:3).

And sandwiched in the middle is the meat of the message and fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It is the simple truth that "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."

We probably all know that John son of Zechariah is same person as John the Baptist. And this story of John coming out of the wilderness is in all four Gospels with a consistent theme. Big changes are on the way. The world will never be the same.

Here's another way to look at this story. Think back to the end of August, 2005. Remember the day or two before Hurricane Katrina. People warned you of danger. They told you to stop what you were doing and get ready for what was coming. You had to change your plans.

John the Baptist's message was similar. He told people to stop what they were doing and warned of coming danger. Just as the voice on the radio told you to go to the literal high ground for safety, John's voice in the wilderness told people to seek the spiritual high ground for salvation.

Why did John do this? Scripture tells us that he was preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus Christ. But what needed preparing? Certainly Jesus' teachings and miracles were going to speak for themselves. What could John the Baptist possibly add to the picture?

One answer is that he was called to baptize Jesus, which we will celebrate in a few weeks. His message also foreshadowed the beginning of God's kingdom with Christ's birth in the manger, and the fulfillment of that kingdom with Christ's coming again in the clouds in glory.

John the Baptist proclaimed both of these events, and thus he was placed by God at the center of the most crucial time in history for God's people. The word of God that John received in the wilderness was no less than the revelation of God's plan for humanity.

This means John's preaching and ministry must be taken seriously. He was more than an advance man or warm-up act. He was more than someone who just announced the main attraction. He was the last prophet before Jesus, and we have had none since. And his call to a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins was crucial to the salvation offered by God in Christ.

II.

So we see two concepts here. One is a baptism of repentance, which was something that John could proclaim and do. The other is forgiveness of sins, which only God through Jesus Christ can proclaim and do. For today, let's look at this idea of repentance, which is an essential part of practicing of our faith and living a Christian life. It's the part that's up to us.

A common view is that repentance means a sense of regret or sorrow for doing something wrong or failing to do something right. John the Baptist, however, had a broader view that went beyond sin or morality. He also called people to repent of things that interfered with their relationship with God. He proclaimed the need to come to faith as well as to depart from sin.

John also believed repentance was an action, not just a feeling. It meant changing direction and doing something different, not just being remorseful. Repentance, according to John, required an actual change in behavior and attitude toward one's neighbor and toward God.

And for many of us, it's probably is not a convenient time of the year to think about changing how we do things. We might be tempted to say, "Give me a break God, cut me some slack and just let me get through Christmas. Then I'll deal with all that other stuff during Lent."

This reminds me of two elderly ladies leaving church after a sermon on repentance, where the preacher used St. Paul's example of dying to sin (Ro. 6:11). One lady asked the other, "Do you think you have died to sin?" She replied, I don't know, but I do recall feeling faint a few times."

Well, feeling faint probably does not cut it according to John the Baptist. He proclaimed the need to actually do something, to make a quick U-turn when we find ourselves going down the wrong road, and to return to what is right.

And as we try to apply John's words in a contemporary setting, we can see two areas where John's broader view of repentance can be important. The first is within ourselves, and the second is within the church.

III.

Let's start with ourselves. Consider the story of the mother and her young son shopping at the mall. The mother thought her son was following behind as they were walking, but when she looked around she saw that he had stopped and was staring intently through a store window.

She went back and he said, "Mommy, Mommy, look. There's baby Jesus in the manger." And his mother said, "Let's go Johnny, we don't have time for that. We have to get ready for Christmas."

What's wrong with that picture? Obviously, contemporary culture and the commercialization of Christmas caused Johnny's mother to completely miss the meaning of Christmas. And it also showed she had not given much thought to Advent either.

This is one of the purposes of Advent. It is intended as a time of introspection and reflection about our lives, as well as a time of joy and celebration. It is intended to be a time when we give serious thought to our relationship with God and the place of faith in our lives.

And thinking about it is the first half of what John the Baptist meant as he called people to repentance. The other half, as I mentioned earlier, means being led by the Spirit to make that U-turn if our destinations are not in accordance with God's will.

Now, I think that I know something about St. Thomas, and I think we are good people. Certainly we all have things in our lives we might change, but we're probably not confronted with really bad circumstances. I think we all respect the law, love our families, and are patriotic Americans.

And I would suspect that if we take John the Baptist's message to heart, we might be more inclined to consider how we witness to our faith in the world and live as Christian examples to others. Jesus gave us the Great Commandments. Love God and our neighbors. Those enduring words probably are where we might focus our attention.

What about our relationship with God? Do we feel connected, and is our spirituality real and vital, or does God seem far away? Does church uplift our spirits or does it seem routine or dull? Once again, if our faith is not lively we can change what we are doing. God through the Holy Spirit will help us turn around, but he asks us to take the first step and go to him in prayer and in action.

And how do we relate to other people? Do we love our neighbor, or are we sometimes intolerant or self-absorbed. Does pride or selfishness take precedence on occasion over kindness, charity, and patience? If these are areas where we can do better we again can call upon God through the Holy Spirit to help, but again it is up to us to take the first step.

This ideas are part of the meaning of repentance in the inclusive spiritual sense John the Baptist intended, not in the more narrow moral dictionary sense. It's actually pretty easy. Let's stop and take a look around. Do we like where we are? If not, we can think about today's Gospel.

IV.

The other place in our lives where we can carry out John's call to repentance is encouraging the church to recover its prophetic voice in an increasingly secular culture. Many contemporary religious leaders seem to believe that the church's primary role is to function as a social service agency as it carries its work to the poor, needy, and disadvantaged.

And that's a good and important thing to do. It's essential to focus on mission. We live in a world full of food and a world full of hungry people. And there seems to be a distribution problem.

But our priority is more than just mission. We also live in a world full of God and a world full of people who do not know him. Again, there seems to be a distribution problem.

We first are called to love God, and that means worshipping God, doing his will, and looking to Holy Scripture as his revealed Word to guide us in this world. The most important thing we do at St. Thomas happens on Sunday morning. Only by worshipping God in truth and spirit can we prepare ourselves to take God's love into the world.

This leads to the point that God now seems absent from much of the world. And it's not because he moved. We used to see crèches and manger scenes in public settings. Not any more. Now, it's Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

We also used to feel completely natural about wishing someone Merry Christmas. Not any more. Now, unless we are with people we know well, we encounter the implicit coercion of political correctness to say Happy Holidays instead.

And this is a reality year around. Religion is being driven out of the public forum. We are expected to suppress our Christianity so that we don't offend people of other faiths, or those with no faith at all. But, of course, no such conditions are applied to them.

So, when today's Gospel calls us to turn around and prepare the way of the Lord, it sends a strong message to build up the church as well as to strengthen ourselves. The church also is called to do and be what John preached, and to reclaim its proper role. And if we do not lead the church in standing against this erosion of God's place in society, who will?

V.

Two thousand years have passed since John the Baptist called people to repent and proclaimed the way of the Lord. Some things have changed, some have not. Nations have come and gone. Societies and cultures have evolved. But the Gospel has stayed the same. What John said then applies now. Through repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ we gain salvation and eternity.

But even though we try to live faithfully, we don't always accomplish it. Sometimes we might be traveling down that unrighteous road that Satan has made so smooth and attractive for us, and we notice signs put up by the Holy Spirit. U-turn! U-turn ahead! If you see those signs in your heart, do what the sign says. Turn around and go back. John the Baptist was right. And you will find peace, forgiveness, and the joy of the Lord in your life. *Amen.*