

I remember as a kid watching the WIZARD OF OZ, and wondering how someone could talk if they didn't have a brain – like the Scarecrow. But now I've seen FACEBOOK.....

I love some of these southern expressions – and I recently came across this one: Have you ever listened to some folks for a minute and thought, 'Their cornbread ain't done in the middle!'

It seems that the liturgists all agree that we can't get to Jesus and Christmas without first hearing John the Baptist preach on the Second Sunday of Advent. This happens in all 3 lectionary cycles. That is because John is a bridge from the Old Testament to the New. While John preaches about what's happening now and in the future, we can't make sense of him except by knowing what God has done before. Three Old Testament verses are enlisted and combined to explain who John the Baptizer is and what he's up to Exodus 23:20-- "See, I am sending an angel before you, to guard you on the way and bring you to the place I have prepared;" Malachi 3:1 --"Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me..."; and Isaiah 40:3 --"A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!" John dresses in wilderness clothing, like an Old Testament prophet (2 Kings 1:8; Zachariah 13:4). He doesn't dress in jeans and a tee shirt, just one of the guys. Nor does he wear vestments that certify that he has been properly trained and approved by the Bishop. John is the last, wild, untamed, eccentric Old Testament prophet who prepares us for the Prophet Jesus, the voice who shouts: "Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight."

God's action, according to John, calls for human reaction – repent, turn around, let go of the past and embrace God's future. The repentance is accomplished through a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,' signifying a turning toward God.

Luke has a great deal of information about the moment when John was called to preach – the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea, Herod ruler over Galilee and during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiphas.

Emperor Tiberius was worshipped as a god – by legal enforcement. Pilate was Rome's strongman appointed as ruler over Galilee – put there to be sure that the heel of Rome is on the necks of the Jews. All of these people are puppets of the emperor, put there to be sure that everybody in Judea knows who's in charge and what will happen if anybody questions the omnipotence of Tiberius. And lest we think this oppression is limited to politicians in palaces, Luke says that all this was going on with the blessing and collusion during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. The clergy had been coopted by the politicians.

The word John preaches is not his own. His sermons are not self-written or original. If God had not come to John out in the wilderness, there would be nothing for John to say. Luke is clear, "the word of God came to John." John the Baptist didn't come to God; God came to John. I think this distinction is important, John is in the wilderness. He is out beyond the established, governmentally approved media outlets. It is there, in the wilderness, in a world full of political oppression and unjust suffering, where the powerful swagger about stepping on the powerless, that the word of God comes to John the Baptist.

And John gives people the good word: get ready, God's coming to us. God is reaching out to us. The typical way to get from exile in Babylonia back home to Israel is to go all the way around the desert, over the mountains, through the wilderness valleys. The prophet Isaiah foretold a time when God Almighty was going

to perform a mighty highway construction program, straight through the desert down a level highway straight home.

And we should not miss the 'news' in Good News. The gospel is not, in the Greek, enlightenment, or mystery, or secret knowledge that a wise person whispers into our ears, or rules and regulations that, by following, will make our life turn out right. The gospel is EVANGELION, Good News. Get ready to be surprised by the new, the God we didn't expect. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, 8 December 2024, p. 30-31)

OK, so what? John's message was a call to repentance. One of the towering marks of this age is the absence of guilt. Some are pleased that guilt has been dethroned; others recognize this as a serious loss. The absence of guilt in our society makes it very difficult to talk about repentance. For if there is no feeling of guilt, then there is no need for repentance.

For many the word repentance is an old-fashioned word that belongs to yesterday. It is equated with sackcloth and ashes. Some see repentance as something that we do only if we get caught. But repentance is far more than simply blurting out 'I'm sorry' if we get caught cheating on the IRS or our spouse. Nor is repentance merely turning over a new leaf or starting over again. It is also more than a quick act of contrition in a confessional.

John the Baptist calls us to take our sinning seriously. Why? Because God does. Repentance is not just changing our minds, or feeling sorry for something that we have done, or not done, or even making bold resolves that we will never participate in certain conduct again. Instead, repentance means to turn around and go in another direction. What John wanted us to hear was: Turn your life toward this one called the Messiah. This is not negative or dour. Rather, it breaks the chains of oppression and death that hold us back.

It's not unusual for someone to remark to me during Advent that John the Baptist takes all of the fun out of Christmas. But that couldn't be further from the truth. This weird eccentric in funny clothes puts the joy BACK into Christmas. For he is the one who calls us not to Christmas the way our culture celebrates it, but to Christmas as it is meant to be. It is not about getting gifts, not even about giving gifts. It is about giving ourselves over to Christ, which is to give ourselves to others. (adapted from Brett Blair, "Repent your Way to a Merry Christmas" in SERMON AND WORSHIP RESOURCES, Advent 2C, p. 2-3)

And finally, once we allow God in, if we go in a new direction, if we give ourselves over to God -- God will begin healing our heavy hearts, our sagging spirits, our ragged road ahead.

If we are feeling down and defeated; if we feel we have a hole in our heart that no one has been able to fill -- God will fill that gap. God will complete that missing piece.

Is our life a series of -- too many impossible expectations? Too many hills to climb with never a reprieve? Too much to do? Too much stress? Are we feeling exhausted like we can't take one more step? God will make our path walkable again.

Have we made mistakes in our life that we feel we can't forgive? Does our past torture us? Does meaning elude us? Are we caught in a web of deceit either with others or ourselves? God will set us straight and help us learn how to walk a new path in a brand new direction.

Do we feel rough around the edges, angry or bitter? Has our grief made us hard, prickly, or heavy-hearted? Do we struggle with a past that seeks to consume us? Have we built fortresses of protection around

ourselves that no one can vanquish? God will smooth our rough exterior and allow us to be vulnerable and feel loved and loving again.

For God has come not to -- judge the world, as Jesus told us, but to save it. When God comes into our life, our heart, our soul, we will see and know God's healing touch. And our life will never be the same.

Do we long to sail more smoothly through life's icebergs? Do we want to find solace even in the midst of storms? Do we believe that God can restore even the most screwed up life?

All we have to do is let Christ into our heart.

This is John's good news. This is the news we celebrate in advent. This is the meaning behind the birth and incarnation of Christ.

He has come to repair the world. And -- all humanity will see God's salvation.

There is no soul too sick for Jesus to heal.

There is no heart too damaged for God to repair.

There is no road too rocky for Jesus to clear.

There is no one beyond God's loving care.

It may take some time. It may mean a few detours along the way.

But the results will always be worth it.

This advent, may we open our hearts to God's gift of grace, and to Christ's healing Spirit. Amen. (last part adapted from Lori Wagner, "God on the Move" in SERMON AND WORSHIP RESOURCES, 8 December 2024, p. 3-4)