

+ Luke 3:1-6 + Prepare with Real Repentance + 2nd Sunday in Advent + 7 December 2014 +

During these weeks before Christmas, you can't help, but ask, "What's real?" For example, we hear many wishes for peace, but is that peace real or is it only "let's tolerate each other during the holidays"? We hear about the "joy of Christmas," but are people really happy about Christmas itself or about the gifts they get, the food they eat, or the people they're around? You hear songs or watch movies about love at Christmas time, but is that love real or is it merely something that won't last into the New Year?

I'm not trying to put a damper on what you enjoy about Christmas or the weeks leading up to it, but how often don't we find ourselves asking, "What's real?", this time of year? You go to the mall and you can get your picture taken with Santa. You see a beautiful display of gifts and decorations on a towering tree. Is all or any of that real or are they there to get busy shoppers in a holiday mood for shopping?

How about the way that people act towards one another, especially in families or relationships or in the workplace? Are we all just trying to get along to get through the holidays or is the way we interact with others real? Are our Advent preparations real or are we simply going through the motions because that's what we're supposed to do this time of year?

There's a lot that's not "real" during these Advent weeks before Christmas, but in Luke 3, God confronts us with reality. It's stark. It's eye-opening. It's even shocking, because it forces us to see what's real. The Lord's prophet cries out from the banks of the Jordan River, **"Prepare the way for the Lord!"** In the midst of so much that is artificial, let's find out what is real.

Prepare with your eyes seeing what life is really like. The evangelist Luke does something unusual at the beginning of our text. He devotes almost an entire paragraph to historical details. Luke was a physician. So you can almost see him taking down detailed notes describing the reality of the historical setting of our text. **"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."** It almost makes your eyes glaze over with all that detail, doesn't it?

Yet Luke had a purpose in recording all that. He wanted his readers to realize that all these events in Holy Scripture happened during a very real time in history in a very real place. This very real historical setting was a very real disappointment for Jews living in Judea and Galilee.

Tiberius Caesar ruled over the Roman Empire. The kingdom of Herod the Great had been divided up four ways, and his son Herod Antipas was merely the ruler of a backwater region called Galilee. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor in Judea, where the temple and the capital city of Jerusalem could be found. Those who hoped that God would provide an earthly messiah to overthrow the wretched Romans and rule the world from Jerusalem would be sorely disappointed when the real Messiah gave his life on a cross three years later while all three rulers still held power.

Even their religious life was messed up. For centuries, one high priest served in God's temple, but the Romans were in power and they used the office of the high priest like a pawn to control the people. So Annas and Caiaphas both served as high priests and would be so when Jesus would stand before them on trial three years later. Reality was disappointing.

So into this real time and place in history, the Lord commissioned John, the only son of Zechariah—an aged priest who could tell his own story of unbelief in God's promises. The Lord didn't call John in the middle of a packed temple or a busy marketplace, but out in the wilderness. To be honest, John was a rather strange-looking dude who did some rather strange things. Mark (1:6) tells us, **"John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey."** Not necessarily the type of guy whose poster the kids would put up in their bedrooms, but he was a very real prophet with a real message from God to proclaim—a message that drew people from all over the Judean countryside. He practically emptied the city of Jerusalem, because everyone knew that his message was different. It was about reality. **"Prepare the way for the Lord!"** "Repent for the Lord is coming!"

When you take a real, close, objective look at your life, what do you see? Now I suppose you could focus on the good things, the blessings, the times of joy, but then it wouldn't be a real, objective, complete look at your life. As you and I look at our lives, we need to see the real detail like that described by Luke. You know the history of your life—the impressive details and the embarrassing ones, the joys and the disappointments, the

public details that puff you up and the private details that shame you, the fun times and the sins of youth or weakness. I see the same in my own life

Isn't it true, then, that for us and everyone else reality can be very disappointing? That's why you and I need to hear John's message of warning and repentance—even today 2,000 years later. You and I need God to confront us through his wild-looking prophet to show us what's real and to lead us to prepare with real repentance.

John's message was meant to prepare the way through people's hearts for the coming Messiah. They weren't getting ready for the arrival of an earthly king, but in a sense, the Lord was going to prepare hearts through John the same way that people in that region would prepare for the arrival of a king. It would be a great demolition and construction project through hearts.

“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.” Sin and guilt and unbelief had made a mess of human hearts. What once was straight was horribly crooked. What once was smooth was obnoxiously rough. What once was level had transformed into ugly, torn-up valleys and terrifying crags.

Into this nasty environment, the Lord's prophet came with the bulldozer of God's holy Law and prepared the way for the coming King of kings by calling the people to repent. For those who had veered off in every direction of temptation, John called them to truly return to the straight path of God. For those whose lives were littered with the boulders and weeds and junk of sin, John called them to leave all that behind. For those whose lives were deeply scarred with the wounds of guilt and the awful effects of sin, John leveled them out with his call to prepare. For those who thought themselves to be high above everyone else, John called them to repent by knocking down their self-righteousness. He called them to repent and turn away from their sins not just on the outside, but with real, honest repentance within.

The prophet calls you and me to real repentance too. When you look back at the real picture of your life, do you see why you need to repent? You see the horribly crooked paths you've followed or the roads littered with the boulders and weeds of the past. You see the deep scars of sin's guilt and how uncertain those peaks of your self-righteousness really are. In your life, you see it, and I see it in my own life, and John's message of reality terrifies us. ***“Prepare the way for the Lord!”*** “Repent for the Lord is coming...again!”

So what can we do? How can we prepare? You and I see all that junk in our lives, and we lay it all out before the Lord. We lay out before him not just the public sins or the sins our loved ones know about, but even those private, secret sins that we've held onto for so long. Our repentance dare not be insincere or artificial. We dare not let it be just an appearance like so much around us. Christ is coming soon and he knows! We dare not hold on to our sins hoping that he won't notice something or that it's no big deal.

...But before you and I think that we can somehow generate real repentance in our hearts by just feeling bad enough about our sins, every one of us needs to realize something—something that John's hearers also needed to realize. Real repentance is only possible if there is real forgiveness.

The Lord sent John to prepare the way for the coming Christ through the hearts of the people, but he wasn't just supposed to condemn their hearts. Near the end of our text there is a statement that tells us what was really at the heart of John's message and ministry. ***“And all mankind will see God's salvation.”*** John was to point people to Jesus.

Sometime after this, John literally did just that when Jesus passed through the crowd. John's life, ministry, mission, and purpose were really all about what he said and did when he saw Jesus. He stopped what he was doing, pointed directly at Jesus, and cried out, ***“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*** (John 1:29) “Look, there is the One for whom I am preparing your hearts! Look, there is the One who came to be God's sacrifice for every one of your sins! Look, there is the Messiah, your Savior!”

Looking ahead to Jesus moved John to not only call people to repentance, but to preach ***“a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”***. With the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism, John brought the forgiveness of sins coming in Jesus to young and old, rich and poor, to penitent sinners whose lives were so very messed up by sin and guilt.

...But we don't have to look ahead like John did. It's been 2,000 years and we know the rest of the story. We look back and see how Jesus lived the perfect life we could not. We look back and see how the Lamb of God

gave his life for the sin of the world. We look back and see how Christ conquered death with an empty tomb. We look back and see real forgiveness from a real Savior.

Holy Baptism still gives the forgiveness of sins to young and old, rich and poor. Those waters are just as cleansing now because they connect us intimately to the reality of Christ's death and resurrection from the dead. Those saving waters connect us to the real forgiveness of our real Savior. So now we can look ahead to Jesus who is really coming again, and as the prophet Isaiah foretold so long ago, we ***"will see God's salvation."***

We will really see it. There's so much around us that's just not "real" during these weeks before Christmas, but in Jesus and his salvation, we have something that is undeniably and eternally real. During this time of preparation, let our repentance be real before the Lord and let us rejoice in the real forgiveness that is ours through our real Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.