



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

DECEMBER 9, 2018

LUKE 3: 1-6

HOW CAN WE PREPARE FOR THE UNEXPECTED?

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

‘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 become straight,

and the rough places shall become level ways,

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

- Every year advent comes around and John the Baptist creeps up on us for two Sundays. This morning and next Sunday, we have very similar readings about a guy whose head ends up on a platter. I don't know about you, but I really didn't get too much out of reading a bunch of names I can barely pronounce: Ituraea, Trachonitis (sounds like a throat condition—I've been fighting this trachonitis all week), Lysanias, Abilene (did John make it to Texas? Maybe he liked rodeos, who knows).
- The experience of being faced with two weeks of gospel readings about a guy who eats locusts and runs around looking like Tarzan does force me into a form of spiritual surrender. That is, I have to set my ego aside and submit to a greater wisdom. In this case, the wisdom of the ancient church that decided all of us for all time need to focus on John the Baptist for two Sundays out of fifty-two.
- Why?
- I don't know, so this will be the shortest sermon of my life....

- My early Christmas present to you.
- Jesus says of John that he is the greatest of those who follow the old way and the least among those who follow the new way. That's a paraphrase, but it's what Jesus means.
- John is the greatest of those who follow the path of repentance as a means of confessing where we've messed up.
- And it's important. But following the old way doesn't go far enough. It leads to a dead end.
- Confession was and, in some cases, still is central to the roman catholic approach to faith. But as Father Richard Rohr points out, 90% of confessions heard by priests today have to do with people confessing that they missed Mass. Nothing of real substance. Nothing that leads to any meaningful change or transformation.
- And, today, only 2% of U.S. Catholics even go to confession.
- But, as the confessional booth slowly emptied, the therapist office quickly filled up. And, the first step in good therapy is still a form of confession.
- Over the years, I've had any number of clients confess as their first step in therapy and then say, "I would never tell my pastor or priest this."
- And I couldn't help but ask why not?
- To a person, people would say something like "oh, he would never understand," or "he would judge me," or "I'm afraid of what he would think of me."
- That's sad, because it suggests that some people play a religious shell game. That religion is viewed as a judgmental and restrictive force, so people feel as though they cannot be truthful with their pastor or priest. The church becoming the place where we present ourselves as better than we really are.
- But we're not going to be like at that CLC, are we? We're going to be real with one another.
- Another belief of the old way, John the Baptist, and advent is "be prepared."
- "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the lord.'"

- Sounds like Christians are to be good boy and girl scouts with a backpack full of preparations.
- But being prepared is a curious notion.
- Reminds me of when I applied to *The Center of Religion and Psychotherapy of Chicago*. They accept four students each year and, that year, three places were already taken. I wasn't accepted at the clinical training center in the town where I lived because my ex-wife had trained there, but that's a story for another time.
- Only one place left so, hurriedly, I filled out their interminable application. You know the kind where you're asked to give your life history and write essays about everything under the sun.
- The day came for my interview, so I drove two-and-a-half hours to Chicago, the center being housed in a building on Michigan avenue, across from the art institute, in the heart of the city. I found a place to park, selling one of my kidneys to pay for a parking spot. And I found my way to the office.
- Terry and Emily, two of the senior psychotherapists, greeted me and ushered me into a room. After a few pleasantries, Terry picked up the paper work **I had so perfectly prepared**, glanced at it, tossed it on a chair and said, "well, this looks all in order. Now let's see if you can be in the room with us...."
- "Wait a minute," I thought, "What about all my wonderful preparation? You just toss it on a chair???! And how was I supposed to prepare to 'just to be in the room with you?'"
- There was no way to prepare.
- In order to be accepted for training that would prepare me for being in the room with a client, I had to show I could, in the moment, just be real with Terry and Emily....
- If we think about it, we cannot prepare for the most important decisions of our lives.
- Marriage. Even if we date for a long time, we don't really know the person. Even when couples live together, there's no way to prepare for what's coming down the line. And for some reason, they divorce more frequently than couples who don't live together.

- Deb and I were both professional counselors when we married. You would think we would be prepared. But until we married and moved in together—me with my two sons and Deb with her daughter—we had no idea what we were in for. And it wasn't pretty for a long time.
- If I hadn't been so charming, I don't think we would have made it, right Deb?
- It's the same with whatever we do for a living. Does school really prepare us for the actual work? Does on-the-job training really prepare us for when we're doing it all by ourselves?
- Terry, who I just mentioned, is one of the best psychotherapists I know and he tells the story of seeing his first client:
 - She was quite a troubled person and, the more she spoke, the more Terry thought, "Wow, she really has some serious problems. She needs to see a professional. Oh wait, I am the professional."
- So, life shows us that being prepared for the really important decisions is likely not all that possible.
- This is why John is part of the old religious way.
- Being a moralist, a person of willpower, like John, is part of the old way. Confess. Be prepared. Dudley Do-Right in an animal skin.
- But Jesus is a middle eastern rabbi, a spiritual teacher, an experiential religious genius who is attempting to guide us into a transformative process leading to our hard-fought individual wisdom and understanding...
- A man dies and goes to heaven where he meets St. Peter at the pearly gates.
- Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done and I give you a certain number of points, depending on its value. When you reach 100, you get in."
- "Okay," says the man, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, loving her deeply.
- "That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth two points."

- “Only two points?” The man said, “Well. I attended church all my life and gave 10% of my earnings and decades of service.”
- “Terrific,” says St. Peter, “that’s certainly worth a point.”
- “One point!!??”
- “I started a soup kitchen in my city and also worked in a shelter for homeless veterans.”
- “Fantastic! Two more points.”
- “Two points??!!” Cries the man, “At this rate, the only way I’ll get into heaven is by the Grace of God.”
- “Bingo,” says St. Peter.
- Being a good person is its own reward. If we are good, it is good that we are, but it doesn’t impact our relationship with God.
- Seeing God as rewarding good is the ego once again getting it wrong for the ego’s sake.
- God comes for the not-so-good, those who have fallen outside the neatly drawn lines, those for whom the ways of the world no longer work or never did, those who have failed at the old way of religion.
- John is the representative of the ego getting it wrong—he needs to lose his head, go out of his mind, get out of his ego, whose letters can stand for **Edging God Out**.
- John shouts, “Get your ego’s resources all together and be prepared.”
- Jesus says, “Unless your ego dies like a seed dies in the soil and grows into something else, you ain’t going to get what I’m saying to you....”
- I was spending a lot of time preparing to leave for after Church today to see my clients in Bloomington, Illinois.
- Way before I leave, I write two sermons. I don’t have time and am too exhausted to do that work when I return home. Prepare two songs. Two children’s sermons. Prepare work for Rheba and whomever else while I’m gone. Take care of a hundred details. Even while I’m taking care of what is needed for the week. On top of a bug of some kind I’ve had for two weeks.

- Then last Sunday night and Monday it becomes clear that I have another kidney stone and, all of a sudden, I'm having to let go of what I thought I needed to prepare for and prepare for exactly what I didn't want or need, even while managing all I needed to manage.
- How long can we keep up the illusion that we can be prepared and in control?
- Jesus never says grab hold of your life and control it. He urges us to let go and let God. He urges us to surrender to a living flow to life over which we have no control and which he calls the holy spirit.
- Oh, John is what the ego wants to hear. Confess and you'll be okay. Be prepared and you'll have it all under control, as that kidney stone moves and I'm puking my guts out over the toilet bowl.
- Who do we think we're kidding other than ourselves?
- John, the representative of old-school religion thinks the Lord who is coming is a God of power, glory, and might. A God who is going to straighten everything out. Who will arrive with a legion of angels or soldiers or both and defeat the Romans who have the Jews under their thumb. He thinks the Lord will come on a throne with a crown. The King will make it right.
- And, in some ways, the church never understood what really happened or, if they did, they quickly forgot.
- For example, look what the church did to the Lord's Prayer.
- Jesus ends his teaching of his prayer with "but deliver us from the evil one." The end. "deliver us from the evil one."
- The church felt it necessary to add: "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Forever and ever."
- Just got to keep hold of that notion of power and control. And it has ruined the church ever since. Selling its soul to rub up against presidents and powermongers throughout history.
- But we don't want the old way at CLC, do we?

- The church, when it invests itself in the old way cannot hold onto the reality that when the Lord came, He came as a vulnerable infant born and placed in a water dish for cattle. And the only thing he could fill was not a valley or a low place, but his diaper.
- When Luther says, “the Bible is the cradle in which we find the Christ child,” he is pointing us to Emmanuel, God with us, as being as fragile, needy and easily damaged as Luna Rose we baptized last Sunday. The baby you held in your arms at birth.
- Prepare the way of the Lord means letting go of our preconceived notions of what it’s supposed to be like in order to see what is really is.
- Prepare the way of the Lord means giving in and giving up to a wisdom greater than our own.
- Prepare the way of the Lord means letting go of the illusion that we can be or ever will be prepared for anything but the least important things in life which we tend to make into the most important.
- Prepare to be unprepared for how God shows up in our lives.
 - Which is a defeat for the ego.
 - But the greatest possible blessing for our souls and spirits.
- We cannot prepare for who God is among us or who God wants us to become. We can only let Him do His lovely transforming work within us.
- **Let’s Make a Baby King** written by Jesse Winchester, recorded by Wynonna and others