



Advent 2: December 6, 2015 Holy Trinity, Vancouver

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, 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, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out 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 be made straight,
 and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

I'm driving to work in the early morning from our new home on 16th Avenue West to the Synod Office on Nanton Avenue the day that the weather had suddenly turned very cold. It's still a new route for me so I'm feeling a bit tentative along my way. Suddenly, a large sedan speeds past me on my right.

"He must be in a hurry!" I say to myself as I glimpse his taillights some distance now in front of me.

But as luck would have it, the light ahead has turned red, and so I catch up to him at the bottom of a gentle hill on 16th. After a time the light soon turns green, he quickly accelerates, but instead of leaving me behind as he did before, his wheels begin to spin, spin because what he has discovered is a sizable patch of black ice. He tries again and gets

nowhere, and then again, and gets nowhere again. “Stop accelerating!” I say to myself, as if I am actually talking to him. “Stop accelerating, or go a different way!”

I tell you this story because I believe that this is the very kind of thing John the Baptist is doing in our Gospel lesson for today. He is standing in the Judean desert telling all who will listen to stop spinning their wheels, to try living in a different way, to try going down a different path.

For John is speaking to people who are stuck—stuck in a world that was defined by the political, social and religious powers of the day, stuck in a world that honoured only those who had credentials and titles, stuck in a world that strongly delineated worthy insiders and lost outsiders and treated them accordingly, stuck in a world that had no understanding or practice of forgiveness.

And so, according to Luke, God’s word comes to this immobilized world in the form of an unlikely person from an unlikely place, through one who does not belong to the power structure and who has no credentials, through one who speaks from the wilderness, the place where neither imperial rule nor the current religious paradigm has much power.

God’s word comes into the world and the word is this—repent.

“Repent,” John says. “Change your mind, turn in another direction, go a different way. And don’t let this simply be a momentary thing. Let it be a complete reorientation of who you are, of how you see things and of what you do. For God is not just calling you to repent for the moment. God is calling you to give yourself over to a baptism of repentance—a full initiation into an alternative community.”

Members of this alternative community undergo, yes, an interior transformation but they also become members of an alternative society, if you will, a society that no longer puts its faith in those with political power or those who are credentialed, a society that is not satisfied with dividing the world into worthy insiders and lost outsiders, a society that is not immobilized by the separation and despair of the unforgiven.

This new society has God’s own “forgiveness of sins” at its core, a phrase we have heard so often that we forget its revolutionary and gracious message. God has instituted a process of restoration by which all are offered second chances, all are offered ways to come in from the cold and be fully restored to fellowship with others, to dignity, to power and to worth. It is, of course, a vital message for all of us who have found ourselves on the outside of things or stuck on account of where we have placed ourselves or where others have placed us.

But in Luke this forgiveness of sins also means that the old order has come to an end. God has put an end to the rule of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Caiaphas and Annas. God has put an end to the political, social, economic and religious structures that insist upon and have profited by everyone staying in the place assigned to them by their circumstances or actions. The paths have been made straight. The valleys have been filled. The mountains and hills have been leveled. The crooked ways have been made straight, and the rough ways have been made smooth so that *all* flesh shall see the salvation of God.

And so this morning, where do you find yourselves out in the cold, stuck and spinning your wheels? Where do you feel captive to a perspective that sees those with credentials and titles as the only ones who have value? Where do you feel hemmed in by a world that still categorizes people as worthy insiders and lost outsiders with no hope of movement?

Or to ask it a different way: Where do you feel the need for God's renewing process of repentance and forgiveness in your or others' lives? Where do you or those in your world need a second chance, a way to turn in the direction of the Lord of life and be restored to dignity, to power and to worth?

This morning we are baptizing and confirming two people from Holy Trinity and confirming one person from St. George's. As a community of the baptized we will also be renewing our own baptismal vows. As we do all these things—baptize, confirm, and renew our vows—all of us once again enter into the baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins that John proclaimed to prepare the way for the One who is the salvation of God.

In entering into this baptism, we will or will once again offer our souls and bodies as the place of God's own claiming. But we will also pledge to take our place in that society of repentance and restoration that is God's own way of renewing the world.