

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness Luke 3:1-6

Today is only the third week I have been here as your designated minister, but I have a question for you. If I were to call you on the phone, and not tell you who I am, would you recognize my voice? Most likely not, but some might, like Sue, Candy and Patty, because they have heard me quite a bit.

Familiarity is one way we recognize a voice; whether it is friends or family. And some voices we recognize because they are distinctive; whether it's the rich tones of James Earl Jones, or the southern charm of Dolly Parton. But then there are those voices we recognize, not for their tone, but for their message. Their words hold power and hope, and we remember them for years to come. Words like "we have nothing to fear, but fear itself", "Ask not what your county can do for you, rather ask what you can do for your county", and "I have a dream, that one day this nation will live out the true meaning of its creed."

Today, in the Scripture we hear words that have been known for generations. We heard "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord." That is an unmistakable voice, and a powerful message. And yet for all its familiarity and power we often mis-hear what is being said. Listen again to Luke's account: "the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That is it folks. That is John's message. To put it more succinctly, "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand."

We have the strange habit as we read this passage of combining the words of Isaiah the prophet with John the prophet. We take John's message about repentance and Isaiah's message about preparing a way for the Lord in the wilderness, and we conclude that we are the ones who must do the work of leveling every mountain and hill, and raising up every valley and smoothing every rough place.

But that is not the message that John proclaims! John's message is a word of grace. The announcement of lifting up every valley, and making every mountain and hill level and all the crooked places straight - is not talk about what we must do, rather it is a message about what God does for us. Because if we could lift up the deep pits we get ourselves into, if we could level the impossible heights of trouble we face, if we could straighten out all that is crooked and rough in this world; well, we wouldn't need a Savior, now would we? The gift of God, the message of grace, which is announced in the prophecy of Isaiah, and in the proclamation of John the Baptist, and in the ministry of the Christ to whom John pointed, is that God is the one who levels and smooths the rough road God is the one who lifts up and makes straight the path.

But that does not leave us off the hook. Look again at what John does proclaim – a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now, that is a mouthful of religious jargon. But what it does mean is that we are called to repent. And we get just as messed up with that one word “Repent” as we do with the whole of ‘valleys and mountains and rough roads.’ For us ‘repentance’ is bearing misery and reproach, shaming and groveling; maybe even camel hair shirts and eating bugs, and a good dose of self-flagellation. But that is not what John is talking about, and that is not what God wants for us.

So what is repentance? Repentance is simply going in a new direction. Repentance, for all its holy association, is not a word that was invented by the church. It’s a word first associated with traveling, when, in a time before roads and maps, it was easy to get lost. It’s when you notice things just don’t seem right, and you realize "Hey, I'm going the wrong direction". And then you turn around and head in right direction. That is repentance, whether it’s on a highway, or on life’s journey.

That is the preaching of John in the wilderness. John is saying there is something we need to recognize about ourselves and our lives. And it is simply this— we have been headed in the wrong direction, away from God and God’s desire for our world. And it will take both our repentance, our turning again to God, and God’s work of restoration, God’s re-forming of the world, to make things right again; as John said when ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

And when we repent, when we own up to God, and have a heart to change, when we decide to go in the way God calls us to go and then do it, then God takes care of the rest. God prepares the road for us, walks the road with us, through mountains and valleys, over rough terrain and crooked paths and leads us to Himself.

John the Baptist has a message for us today, and it is a message of grace.” Repent, the kingdom of God is near.” John wants us all to come and be washed in the pool of God's forgiveness; to be immersed in the grace of God and to walk the road that he has prepared for us, a road that will lead to life, for us, for our neighbors, and for the world.

This is what God wants for us, and what God has always wanted for us. In fact, God wants that so much, that God gave himself to us in the child born in Bethlehem, so that we might come to know hope and peace, joy and love, and a whole new way of life.

In this advent season- today- on our journey of life, may we turn again to the God of grace, and find the gift of life. Amen

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