

McCabe United Methodist Church

December 6, 2009

“Prepare”

Luke 3:1-6

Pastor Gary Walters

Our Scripture lesson this morning comes from Luke Chapter 3:1-6.

“For 15 years Emperor Tiberius ruled that part of the world. Pontius Pilot was the governor of Judea and Herod was the ruler of Galilee, Herod’s brother Philip was the ruler of the country of Ituraea and Lysanias was the ruler of Abilene and Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish high priests. At that time God spoke to Zechariah’s son John, who was living in the desert. So John went along the Jordan valley telling the people ‘Turn back to God and be baptized, then your sins will be forgiven.’ Isaiah the prophet wrote about John when he said, ‘In the desert someone is shouting, prepare the way of the Lord, make a straight path for him. Fill up every valley and level every mountain and hill. Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads, then everyone will see the saving power of God.’”

The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Every time I come across this passage, maybe I tried to sing this last year too, but I think of the tune from Godspell that goes along with John the Baptist in that musical. “Pre-eee-pare ye the way of the Lord.” I’m not very good at it, but you get the idea, there is this tune and they head into this chorus and it’s a really catchy tune and they repeat about 20 times so it gets stuck in your mind. When I hear John the Baptist I think of that tune and definitely that word—prepare that he proclaimed and that they sing about in Godspell, there is a lot of that going on in December. Whether it’s getting ready for gatherings and programs or family and friends, or food and festivities, or different shopping and gifts, whatever, there are a lot of events, or a lot of happenings that we pack into this month. But just exactly what is it we are preparing for? Think about that. We talked about that already a little bit with the children’s message, but what is it we are preparing for?

I think that at times there is this ideal in our heads of kind of warm, family gatherings and great fellowship with friends and kind of the Hallmark card sort of picture where you look in the picture window and the fire is roaring and the eggnog is served. You get the idea, it’s just this kind of warm, picture-perfect kind of event that we are after.

In answering that question, “What is it we are preparing for?” Luke has a word for us. He relays that to us through John the Baptist. John the Baptist is out in the wilderness proclaiming “prepare the way of the Lord.” In that day and age they literally prepared

the way. When a lord or king was coming they kind of pulled out all the stops. It was often the impetus for major building programs. They would build bridges to raise up the valleys and they really would straighten out the roads and fill in the potholes and probably build some monument because so and so was coming to visit. Well, Isaiah is talking to the Jewish exiles off in Babylon who needed to hear some good news. They were far from their land and they felt far from their God, but Isaiah was telling them that even in this far land God will come to you so prepare. Not literally prepare the road, like often was the case when royalty or some Lord would come, but to prepare themselves as a people, as the people of God.

Luke uses those words to describe John's ministry. He isn't speaking to people who are off in exile, but in a sense they are slaves, even in their own country and in their own land because Rome oppressed them. The burden was heavy, the taxes were great and the common people suffered under the weight of those taxes. The people were longing once again for a savior. They wanted this messiah to show up and establish his eternal kingdom here on earth. Eternal because, after all, that is what scripture had promised them. But it's interesting, John doesn't tell them, in terms of preparing, he doesn't tell them to go out and start a rebellion, he doesn't tell them to rise up against the Romans, he doesn't even tell them to go out and clean their homes and bake cookies and do some shopping, which is I think where we go with advent preparation, but he tells them to prepare by repentance and baptism. John's baptism isn't what we think of with baptism. John's baptism was specifically for that purpose of repentance. This wasn't an initiation or rite into the Jewish community or into the church, it was literally a cleansing using the water as a symbol for the cleansing away of the sins and that public commitment to repentance of going on direction and knowing that you need a change and turning around and doing an about face. Going from doing what is wrong to doing what is right.

Well, that's kind of an odd way to prepare advent. When we think of advent it is anything but the season of repentance, it's not somber. And yet, originally, in terms of its history, advent was exactly that. It was a fast from the Festival of St. Andrew, which is December 1, to the Festival of St. Nicholas (it was by complete accident that my boy's have those names) but in those days it was supposed to be a season of fasting and introspection where the church, the people of God, would pause and look at their lives and examine where it was that they needed to repent, where they needed to clean up. To smooth off a few of those rough edges, that they might be ready for the Christ child.

Well, we have kind of got it backwards from that. Rather than fasting through the days of Advent, it is kind of one endless party. It's the office party, and the party with this group of friends, and that group of friends, and this organization and that and we have the stuff at church and its one big blowout and it's wow. Then after Christmas,

the biggest blowout of them all, we go into mourning and repentance over all the excess over the month and we think “Ohhh, okay these are the New Year’s resolutions I am going to make in order to do it better next year.” I don’t know, maybe that works, but maybe there is something to what John is about, what John is telling us in terms of preparing for the coming of Christ.

As I was looking over this though, this thought occurred to me. What would happen if we don’t prepare, and the realization was startling! If we don’t prepare, what is going to happen? Will it make a difference? The answer is no. You see, on the first Christmas, there were thousands and thousands of people packed into Bethlehem and just a few miles away in the city of Jerusalem it was overflowing; one of the reasons there was no room at the inn. And yet with all of those people packed into Bethlehem and the countryside, the region around, who noticed that the Christ child had come, but a handful of shepherds, and later on a few sages or wisemen from a distant country. But the masses, most of those people missed it completely. The fact that they missed it didn’t keep the Christ child from coming, the Messiah still came, the Messiah will still come if we fail to plan, if we fail to prepare ourselves. So in that sense it makes no difference, but you can rest assured, you can guarantee that it made a huge difference for those shepherds and for those wisemen, that they recognized the signs, that they saw the angels, that they heard the heavenly chorus. They came and bowed down and they worshiped before the Christ child. But it made a difference, too, for those others who didn’t, who just went on with life as normal, hurrying on in their routine, their schedule. The difference wasn’t for the better.

I guess all that to say that the Messiah will come either way. But, our preparations aren’t to change the world, our preparations are to change us. So the question that it brings to mind is, do your holiday traditions and do your preparations for Christmas, change you? Or, are they simply a distraction, or even worse, do they drive any opportunity for true worship in preparation of Christ, clear out of your schedule and clear out of your lives? It’s a good question to consider. I don’t think that it’s all one or the other. For all of us there is probably a mix, some things are more helpful than others and at least the best version of ourselves or the best picture of our lives, things go along pretty well, but there are those places where we need to repent. Now you and I are all respectable folks. We are not going to get caught in those sins that make headline news, or earn a paragraph in the newspaper somewhere, (at least for the most part, hopefully, most of the time). Far more common for us are those more insidious sins of pride or materialism and consumerism that creep into our lives and push out the worship of Christ. Push out the true preparation for the coming of Jesus.

Imagine this scene for just a second. You receive a telegram with a presidential seal on it, hand delivered by a very severe looking gentleman who might have a little microphone in his ear and a dark suit with sunglasses. You open this telegram and it’s

an announcement that the president is coming to your house this coming Saturday to talk over some points of national policy. The president is rubbing shoulders with his constituents in order to get their perspective and you've been one of the people selected. Now regardless of your political affiliation, that's going to be a huge deal. It would be amazing, the president of the United States is going to set foot in my house and ask me opinions about national policy. But, you're a little dubious about this telegram. Come on, this stuff doesn't really happen and you have a lot on your schedule anyway so, well, it ends up in that pile on your kitchen counter that is somewhere in your to do list. Saturday morning rolls around and the doorbell rings very early and you wonder "who in the world is getting me up at this hour on Saturday morning." So you put on your bathrobe and your slippers, the ones with the dog ears on them, and your hair is standing on end and you shuffle out to the door and open it up and there stands the president of the United States, flanked by his secret service agents and his whole entourage standing behind him. Are you unprepared? You better believe it! Embarrassing? Absolutely! Awkward? Extremely! It just gets worse as you invite him in your house and you have to clear last night's dishes off the kitchen table so they can find a place to sit down, and you scramble to put on a pot of coffee and very apologetically excuse yourself out of the room so you can go put on clothes and be at least halfway presentable.

Now imagine that it's not the president but that it's Jesus and it's Christmas morning and instead of dishes and a house that's in disarray, its evidence of a life lived with little regard or little thought toward God that litters the table and the counter, sitting there for Jesus to see. And, there is no bathrobe in the world that is going to hide that. Do our Christmas preparations make a difference? No, the Messiah will come anyway. But does it make a difference? Of course it does, because for you and me it makes all the difference in the world. It's the difference between entering into the story of Christ and his birth that God loved us enough to step from heaven to a stable. Or it's us just stuffing one more event into our busy lives and our overburdened schedules and that is a huge difference. Well, that preparation allows us to make room, not only in our homes, but in our hearts and our lives and John gives us this call today. To slow down long enough to examine where it is in our lives that we may need to make some adjustments so that when Christ arrives Christmas morning, we are ready. We are ready to worship and we are ready to invite him into our lives and our homes. That's what we prepare for this Christmas. Would you pray with me?

Lord we thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ and we pray that you will help us prepare well for his coming. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.