

Luke 1:67-79 ⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: ⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Luke 3:1-14 ¹ 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, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ 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; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" ⁷ John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹ And he replied, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³ He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Luke 1:67-79 and Luke 3:1-14
12/09/18 – Saginaw First U.M.C.
"The Way of Peace"
Rev. Amy Terhune

Elie Wiesel is one of the great story-tellers of our time. He's a Jew who with a poignant memory of the Holocaust. He tells stories with a clarity and a passion that sets your soul on fire. In fact, a collection of his Hasidic stories is entitled "Souls on Fire". Let me read you the introduction to that book:

"My father, an enlightened spirit, believed in man, My grandfather, a fervent Hasid, believed in God. The one taught me to speak, the other to sing. Both loved stories. And when I tell mine, I hear their voices. Whispering from beyond the silenced storm, they are what links the survivor to their memory."

"In the book, Wiesel tells the story of a traveler who loses his way in the forest. It is dark and he is afraid. Danger lurks behind every tree. Suddenly, a storm shatters the silence—thunder bellows forth from menacing clouds and lightening streaks the blackened sky. Writes Wiesel: "The fool looks at the lightening, the wise man at the road that lies -- illuminated -- before him. [from *Souls on Fire*, New York, Summit Books, 1972, p. 154.]

John the Baptist's preaching was like that storm. You can hear his voice, shrill with urgency, thundering his message until it reverberates off the barren, rocky landscape. And his words are lightening bolts—electric, charged with raw intensity and abrasive candor.

The fool cowers away from the severe nature of John's words. But the wise let them illumine the road before us. Because, like it or not, there's no avoiding John the Baptist. As Dr. Fred Craddock once wrote, "Advent pilgrims on the way to the manger must pass through the desert where John is preaching." What are we to do with this man? He's certainly doesn't seem to fit with the season, does he? Have we ever encountered a crèche scene or a Christmas Pageant that includes John the Baptist? While all around us, songs are wafting through the air about peace on earth and goodwill to humankind, John is crying out "Repent!"

But to ignore him is foolhardy. All four gospels draw him to our attention, and three of them—Mark, Luke, and John—figure him prominently in chapter one as the herald before the Christ. In our lesson for today from Luke 3, Luke makes a point of noting the power players—Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate the governor of Judea. Then there's Herod, the ruler of Galilee; and Herod's brother Philip and Lysanias, who rule over surrounding territories. There's Annas and Caiaphas, High Priests in Jerusalem's temple. And then there's real power. Overlooking all these prominent figures, the word of God comes to John in the wilderness. Why John? He's lacks any kind of social grace or political savvy. The crowd comes out to the wilderness to hear his message and receive Baptism, and he calls them a brood of vipers—hardly flattering. I wonder how far I'd get if I started hurling insults as those who came to hear the sermons I'm given?

But he must be reckoned with. Even though all we long for is angels and shepherds and a little family huddled together beneath the light of a star, our journey takes us through that darkened wood where the thunder resounds and the lightening blazes. But his words do illumine a path for us. And as the prophecies at his birth declared: John does indeed illumine those in darkness, and set our feet on the way of peace.

But first, we must understand peace. The peace the scripture promises is far more encompassing than an end to war, violence, conflict, or bloodshed, as important as that peace is to our world. I would take it any day, hands down. But the peace of scripture, the peace Jesus promised his disciples when he breathed on them that first Easter in the upper room, the peace that passes understanding is a peace that is rooted and grounded in our relationship with God. I remember an old interview Dan Rather was did with Billy Graham. Talking about the problems the world faces, Bill Graham made a point of noting that it isn't racism, sexism, immigration, abortion, promiscuity, or any other issue in the news that poses the greatest threat. These are symptoms. Our problem is the human heart, corrupted by sin. Fix that, and our hate, our apathy, our insensitivity all will be swallowed up by the peace of God. And Jesus does fix that. But it's slow, and it's a choice to which we must rededicate ourselves daily, hourly, even. And we must still deal with those who have a vested interest in seeing that we don't find peace—peace within ourselves, peace with others, peace within the systems that shape our society. The old hymn (which our video today quoted) says: Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. That's not sentimentalism or "hokeyness" – that's sound, biblical theology. Peace starts with me and you.

And John got it. John calls us to look inward, to reach outward, to live upward. Those three practices—looking inward, reaching outward, living upward—form a dynamic triangle designed to strengthen our spirits and create a space for God within us – a space of peace and abiding faith. They'll carry us from the wilderness to Bethlehem, so let's take those one at a time.

John's call to look inward is phrased in one simple word: repent! Now, I know what you may be thinking. Repentance is for Lent, right. Who wants to hear about that right now? When did repentance get such a bad rap? Repentance is about fresh starts!

Please don't miss this: "Repentance is not just changing our minds, or feeling sorry for something that we have done, or even making bold resolves that we will never participate in certain conduct again. Instead, repentance means to turn around and go in another direction. What John the Baptist wanted his

audience to hear was: Turn your life toward this one called Messiah. This is not negative or down-faced. Rather, it breaks the chains of oppression and death that hold us back. Certainly, there is an element of humility to repentance. We have to admit we are wrong. But this is not psychologically unhealthy—quite the contrary. When we admit our sin and ask God to take control of our lives, his forgiveness gently warms our frost-bitten spirits like a fire on a winter's night. He gives us a glimpse of ourselves in His eyes—how precious we are, our immeasurable worth.” [adapted from “Repent Your Way to a Merry Christmas” by Brett Blair, www.Sermons.com.] If we want to prepare room in our hearts and lives for Christ this year, we must look inward, examine closely, and find the confidence to not only acknowledge our faults and failures, but also our gifts and graces. And that self-knowledge – that we’re imperfect, but empowered and deeply loved – that is the beginning of the way of peace in our lives. Let go of the sins and burdens that weigh on your heart. You’ve been forgiven. You are loved. Let it shape your heart.

But even as we look inward, John would have us reach outward to others. That’s the second side of the triangle. Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise. John the Baptist understood that part of preparing our hearts for the coming Messiah was exercising our dependence on God and flexing those muscles of resistance to worldly charms. Share out of a desire to see God’s Kingdom come on earth.

I recall a story that Philip Yancey tells “...about the composer Beethoven, a man not known for social grace. Because of his deafness, Beethoven found conversation difficult and humiliating, and he was uncomfortable in crowds. But when he learned of the death of a friend's son, Beethoven hurried to the house, overcome with grief for his friend. He had no words of comfort to offer, for he didn't know what to say. What he did instead was to make his way to the piano, where he played for more than an hour, pouring out his emotions in the most eloquent way he could. He shared his unique gift. He gave the gift of peace, even if it was just a flash of it on a dark road. He offered his very best, and when he finished playing, he left. The friend later remarked that no one else's visit had meant so much. [from Philip Yancey, *Helping The Hurting* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1984), p. 9; as adapted from “Comfort My People” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Most of us understand Beethoven’s instinct to give. We don’t give only when it’s easy and painless. We give, even when it stretches our souls or our wallets, because something inside us needs to give, doesn’t it? We are all recipients of another’s gifts. Someone gave us life and love. Someone gave us an education and an opportunity to hone skills. And our task is to pass them on, those gifts. To share, to reach out, to pass the peace of Christ to another.

And finally, we are called to live upward. John the Baptist came as a harbinger of something different and new and altogether unexpected. He came to prepare the way for God to make the world new again. The call to live upwards is a call to open ourselves to being lifted higher. John himself uses the word ‘righteousness’. Righteousness is not the same as self-righteousness, which is arrogance or narcissism at its worst. Today, many equate righteousness with morality and adherence to the rules, and clearly, John issues a call to moral or ethical behavior. When tax collectors ask him, “Teacher, what should we do?” John said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, but be satisfied with your wages.” Brett Blair explains, “In other words, whatever our role or task is in life, we ought to do it ethically to the best of our ability...”

That makes sense. But I think John the Baptist is calling us to something more profound than morality. As Billy Graham stated to Dan Rather all those years ago: it really is a matter of the heart. It starts small.

“A hundred feet above the Apurimac River, near the remote village of Huinchiri, Peru there is a suspension bridge that connects the Limi-Cuzco Road. It has been there since the 14th century. Using four miles of braided coya grass, the Inca constructed the bridge in phases. First a bowman attached a fine thread to an arrow and fired it across the gorge. A man on the other side tied a cord to the thread and fired it back across the gorge. The cord was then pulled across. One by one the Inca added thicker and thicker

ropes, finally hauling into place a 200 pound floor cable.

“The bridge which today is still suspended across the river continues to serve as a major highway for the people in that part of Peru. It began with a single thread. Think how many changes take place in life because of a single phone call, the implementation of one idea, one visit, or a single letter. All great bridges stem from tiny beginnings.” There was a story in the news just this week about a new invention being worked on by the folks at one of the major sporting good manufacturers. It’s a football helmet that measures the force of a hit against it. If the force is hard enough to cause a concussion, a sensor on the back of the helmet turns a bright color, alerting the referees and coaches to the danger and need for evaluation. The idea began with one eighth grader’s science fair project.

“It is the same for our faith. A single act of forgiveness, a personal commitment to be more involved in the life of the church, an invitation to a stranger, a moment of prayer in the car on the way to work. Major construction is overwhelming. But every change that is made for the betterment of humankind starts with a single act. This is what it is to bear fruit, to be peace in the world.

“Isn’t that what God did with the birth of Christ? God introduced the possibility of total transformation with the gift of a child in a manger. In a remote place of the world and through a humble peasant couple, God set the stage for a new kingdom to emerge. [4 ¶s adapted significantly from Keith Wagner, Possibilities Unlimited, illustrations on Luke 3:1-18, www.Sermons.com.]

As we prepare ourselves to again encounter the child in the manger, we allow the lightening charge of John’s words to light up the road. Bear fruit befitting a changed life. I’ll close today with a story from Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, who reflects on an experience she had as a guest at the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Sierra Leone, West Africa. These are her words: “The meetings were held in the large sanctuary in the capital city, Freetown. Each day as we entered the large doors into the sanctuary there was a young girl, maybe about the age of 8, who begged at the door. She looked ragged, dirty, her hair was matted and knotty, and she had on tattered clothes. No one seemed to know her, and people brushed her aside upon entering. Some of the pastors tried to tell her to go away. We were busy doing the work of the church. She was a bother. This went on for several days.

“As I sat in the pew observing the Conference one day, my peripheral vision caught some motion outside. I looked out the window, and there on the patio, outside the sanctuary was a woman, a lay member of the conference. She found a bucket and some soap. Although dressed in a beautiful traditional tie-dye gown, she pushed up her sleeves, and she was giving that 8-year-old girl a bath. She soaped up her hair and was tenderly making her all clean and new. She washed the clothes the child had been wearing, and they were spread out on the bushes in the sun drying. The woman had gone out and gotten another dress for her to wear, too.

“Hundreds of pastors and devoted laypersons poured into the Methodist Church of Freetown to do the work of the church. But outside, on the edges, quietly and without notice, the work of redemption - the work of Jesus Christ was being done. It was not the work of committees and reports and programs. It was the work of soap, water, a smile, tender human touch, and being able to see the face of Jesus in that of an abandoned 8-year-old girl.” [3 ¶s from ‘Collapsing the Distance Between Heaven and Earth’ by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett, www.Sermons.com.]

A single act from a forgiven soul with eyes to see and heart to care. Flashes of light on the road to a better world. Go and do likewise. Amen.