

Sermon: Repent

Luke 3:1-6

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

How to prepare for meeting with God in this time of Advent? John the Baptist helps us to understand how to prepare for meeting with God.

Last week we saw how John's parents were committed to prayer and to obeying the laws of God. This commitment to prayer and living by the word of God is part of how we prepare.

What will John the Baptist show us this week regarding our preparations to meet with our Lord?

The words we have heard from Luke 3 are surprising. Luke spends a lot of space to make clear in what sort of time, under what political and religious leaders, John the Baptist was called to start his ministry.

1 People that really matter

We hear the names of the rulers of the earth, Roman and Jewish, Emperors and local rulers, secular and religious. We hear of Tiberius, emperor in Rome. We hear of Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea. Then we have Herod, and his brother Philip. Another local ruler, Lysanias, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

These names help us a bit with dating the beginning of the ministry of John. We cannot be very precise, but it must have been between 26 and 28 AD.

But Luke does not name Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas to teach us about the time of John's appearance, but also to show the historical reality or the story. It really happened.

And Luke wants to show us the sharp contrast between those bloody murderous leaders and the work of God through John.

When Luke wrote his gospel, people knew of the evil deeds of the Roman ruler Pontius Pilate - who killed Jesus - and of the Edomite King Herod - who killed John the Baptist. They also knew how high priest Caiaphas was involved in the death of Jesus.

These rulers in their majestic palaces, with their refined social life, their expensive clothes, with their festive meals, they were the jet-set of those days. Today they would fill the gossip pages of the glossy magazines, they would be the guests in tv talk shows. Even though they were ruthless dictators.

John was the opposite of this. He roamed the desert, he drank no wine, he ate locusts. He was not the guy you would invite to your christmas diner party.

But he was the choice of God.

And we? What about us? We are not part of that powerful jet-set, but our curiosity, our interest in the lives of the powerful and famous, what does that tell us about our own orientation?

Would we choose the life of John, or that of these mighty men and women? Are we prepared to give up on all those things that make our lives so pleasant? Do we make our lives pleasant by what we own, or do we find our joy in God?

It is better to be honest. I think we all find it very hard to live a simple life for God; and we spend so much time gathering goodies.

What do you think is the better way to prepare for meeting with God? Focussing on gathering wealth, or a simple life that focuses on pleasing God?

2. The Word of God is received in the desert

The Word of God comes to John in the desert - in his poor and quiet life.

What is so striking is that God does not speak to those leaders of the world or through those rulers. He uses them to do his will. As dumb instruments. As a farmer using his donkey for plowing the field.

But He speaks to a poor man in his desert as his friend.

The desert can be an awful place. It can be ugly, and lonely. Just as your circumstances may be. Your heart may feel like a lonely desert.

But when life seems too bad, when things seem to take a down turn, God can actually speak to you.

Sometimes you have to seek the desert for hearing God speak. A place of aloneness, maybe a quiet place. Because for God it is not so easy to reach us with his word - with so much noise around us. He seeks people in the desert, not in City Stars.

How does God speak his word to us in our silence?

Well, first we need to take time to listen to his written word. We need to take time to read and to consider what it means. Quiet time and quiet space is usually needed.

And in the silence we need to ask God what he has to say to us, today.

And in this process, of thinking, praying and listening to the written word, the Living Word, Jesus Christ enters into the situation, to speak to you. The Living Word applies the written word to your life. He helps you understand, apply, and do.

It was no coincidence that John spoke the word of God to Israel in the desert. The Israelites had to leave the comfort of their busy city-life in Jerusalem, to be confronted by God.

The desert was the place, historically, where Israel got to know God and where the people of God faithfully responded to God.

We may have to lose a bit more of the pleasantness of our lives, before we are able to meet with God... Maybe God has to strip us of our trust in what we possess, our jobs, our trust in our money, our trust in our security that we find in our homes, our possessions... before we begin to trust in Him...

So to prepare for meeting with God, you need to create some space in your busy schedule, create a desert in your agenda. And you may have to create some silence around you, to be able to pray. Maybe you need to create a physical space in your home for being alone.

Let me tell you a secret... Most saints have found out that God does not speak much when you watch tv or play computer games. And he does not speak much while you go out with friends or while you are shopping.

3 Repent

To give God the chance to speak to us seems to be scary. Because his speaking is never without the command to repent. As John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The repentance mentioned in Luke 3:3 is *metanoia* in Greek. The word means: have a new mind ; change your mind and purpose.

We often put repentance together with sin, and that is part of it, but repentance means more than simply a struggle against personal temptation.

It is a total paradigm shift, a transformation of your whole outlook, and of your way of life and our whole being. It is not only about this or that sin that you have to stop doing; it is about a complete transformation of our lives.

Repentance is a turning away from the mindset and orientation that focuses on gratifying your own desires, power, wealth, yes, sin, everything that practically tries to fill the gap in our heart that only God can fill.

God calls us to a turning away from all this, to direct yourself, your mind, your interests, to loving and serving God and each other.

This is a very radical change. A change from I with my own demands, to no longer I but Christ who lives in me.

The message of John was that people should be baptized as the sign of their repentance.

For Jews to be baptized was a strange thing. Yes, people from other nations were baptized, whole families, men, women and children, to be cleansed of their paganism and to become part of the Jewish nation - the people of God.

But now, John treats even the Jews, the people of God, as if they are just as far away from God as all other people.

And this may be true for us here as well.

In the seventh-century, the monk St. John Climacus wrote his book *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. In it, holiness is presented as a ladder of thirty steps.

Step five says this: "Repentance is the renewal of baptism and a contract with God for a fresh start in life . . . [It] is the daughter of hope and the refusal to despair."

If nothing can change in our life, we have reason for despair - but if we can come closer to God, we have reason for hope and repentance is the door to hope. Repentance then is not something awful - but a great gift of God.

If we want to see the salvation of God, if we desire to be ready to meet with God, need continuous repentance.

We need repentance as a lifestyle. Continually to turn away from evil and to turn to God. Continually to return to our baptism and to know - I no longer live - Christ lives in me.

We must not want to participate in the power games of this world, we must reject the deceitfulness of living for ourselves.

The normal rules of our societies shall not be our guiding light or morality.

We do not let evil dictate our responses, our behavior, to what happens to us; we do not want to be part of this world of Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate, and Caiaphas. We have repented of this.

We are loved by God, we are forgiven, that is why our rule of life is love and forgiveness even for those that we so rightly can consider our enemies. But by all means, we do not adopt their methods.

We have repented and we continue to repent and we accept Gods love and forgiveness, not only for ourselves but also for all other people.

This is a faith not for soft and weak people; it is a faith of heroes.

Repentance means believing in Christ, living a life in accordance with the Gospel, and doing works that have to do with righteousness. Next week more on this.

Conclusion

So how do we prepare for meeting with God?

We prayerfully let the word of God come to us, by reading the bible. But considering what it means. By praying that God speaks to us.

We prepare for meeting with God by seeking quiet moments and quiet places; and we all know, this is tough, hard work. Because we are surrounded by noise, even the noise of our mind that never stops. Find times and places these days of Advent to pray and read your bible and listen to God. Find your own desert.

And we must decide to not let our lives be ruled by stuff that has no lasting value. God can satisfy us eternally - nothing else can. That is why today we have a thanksgiving offering. We are thankful to God and we show this by doing away with some of our possessions.

And the heart of Gods word to us is always that we must repent. That we must all the time focus on God and his word, not on the scramble for power and wealth. Even the search for happiness will not help us - because as soon as you think you have it, it is gone.

We pray, we obey, we let the word of God speak to us; we repent of a lifestyle in which we and our desires are central.

Jesus Christ himself is the salvation of God; he comes to you again today in bread and wine. He gave his flesh and blood to transform you. Come to his table with a repentant heart and with the prayer and the desire for him to speak to you and for you to listen and do.

Amen