

U-Turn Ahead
Luke 3:1-6
December 10, 2006

I.

Think back, if you will, to the end of August, 2005. Remember the day or two before Hurricane Katrina. People were warning you of the danger. They were telling you to stop doing what you were doing and get ready for what was coming. They were telling you that you could not live your life normally as if nothing was about to happen, and that you had to change your plans.

In a way, that's what John the Baptist said in Luke's Gospel. He told people to stop doing what they were doing and warning them of the coming danger if they did not. Just as the voice on your radio literally told you to get to the high ground, the voice in the wilderness in today's reading figuratively told the people of first century Palestine to do the same thing.

Why did John do this? We know now with the benefit of history that he was preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus Christ. He was the forerunner for the one yet to come.

But why was this necessary? What needed preparing? Certainly Jesus' teachings and miracles were going to speak for themselves. What did John the Baptist add to the picture?

The answer is that the prophetic words of John have been only partially fulfilled, and the work that he began two thousand years ago still is incomplete. You recall from last week's reading that the season of Advent has two parts to it. We not only celebrate Christ's birth on Christmas day, but we also anticipate his coming again in glory to complete the unveiling of God's kingdom.

John the Baptist proclaimed both, and thus he was placed by God at the pivotal center of the most crucial time in history for God's people. The reading tells us that the word of God came to John in the wilderness, and we now know that the word John received was no less than the revelation of God's plan for humanity

He was the last of the prophets in the Old Testament tradition, and was the first New Testament witness to salvation as well as the first Christian martyr.

So John's preaching and ministry must be taken seriously. He was more than an advance man. He was more than someone who just announced the main attraction. He was more than a warm-up act.

His message of repentance was crucial to the salvation offered by God in Christ. And it is a message that reaches across the centuries to speak to us today.

II.

The Gospel tells us that John went about the region around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There are two concepts here. One was a baptism of repentance, which is something that John could proclaim and do. The other was forgiveness of sins, which John knew that only God through Jesus Christ could proclaim and do. Together, both concepts comprise the good news of salvation as it is understood in the Christian Church today.

So, let's look in more detail at the idea of repentance, which is the crucial first step in the practice of our faith and living the Christian life. This is the part that's up to us, and it's appropriate that we spend some time on it.

It's clear from the way Luke describes John's ministry that repentance is an act, not just a feeling. It means changing direction and doing something different, not just being remorseful or sorry. It means an actual change in behavior, not just a change of opinion about behavior.

And, of course, this probably is not a good time of the year to think about repentance or changing the way we do things. On top of everything else we have going on now, we might be tempted to say "give me a break here God, cut me some slack and just let me get through Christmas. Then I will deal with all that stuff in my New Year's resolutions."

I probably have said something like that on occasion. We all feel some anxiety, stress, and pressure getting ready for Christmas, and it could be difficult to think about whether we need to make changes in our lives when we are just trying to keep our lives on an even keel for a few more weeks.

I am reminded of the story about the mother and her young son Jimmy who were out shopping and struggling against the crowds and deadlines. The mother thought her son was following behind, but when she looked around she saw that he had stopped and was staring intently at something through a store window.

She went back to him and he said, "Mommy, Mommy, look. There's baby Jesus in the manger." Well, wouldn't you know that his mother said, "come on, Jimmy, we don't have time for that. We have to get ready for Christmas."

What's wrong with that picture? Obviously, contemporary culture and the commercialization of Christmas caused Jimmy's mother to completely miss the meaning of Christmas and the enduring parts of the Advent season.

In fact, Advent is intended to be a time of reflection and introspection about our lives. It is intended to be a time when we give serious thought to whether or not we are living the Christian lives we are called to live.

And in doing that we have to think about whether or not we are traveling down some dead-end roads, and if we are, then we are called to change, to make a U-turn and straighten ourselves out. That is the meaning of repentance as proclaimed by John the Baptist. It is not just feeling guilty about something; it is actually doing something about it.

III.

As I read and think about today's reading about John the Baptist, there are two areas where repentance, changing our lives and the way we do things, are important. The first is within ourselves, and the second is within the church.

Let's look at ourselves and do an inventory. We can start anywhere, but let's begin with our families. Do we have open, honest, and connected relationships, or are they shallow, or lonely, or broken. If so, we can change what we are doing and turn around. God will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

What about our health? Are we taking care of ourselves and respecting the bodies that God gave us, or is our blood pressure a little too high, or perhaps we are concerned about our weight or cholesterol readings. If so, we can change what we are doing and turn around. God will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

Maybe our jobs are rewarding and fulfilling, or maybe they are tedious, demanding, and not connected to our dreams and aspirations. If so, perhaps there is some way we can change what we are doing and turn around. God will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

How do we relate to other people? Do we love our neighbor as the commandment tells us, or are we at times intolerant, angry, or self-absorbed. If so, we can change what we are doing and turn around. God will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

And last but not least, what about our faith? Do we feel connected to God, and is our spirituality real and vital, or is it routine, or dull, or does God seem far away? Once again, if it is the latter we can change what we are doing and turn around. God will help us, but he asks us to take the first step.

In contemporary language, we probably would not make a connection between repentance and the types of things I have just outlined. We might think of repentance only in a context of moral values. But John, in today's Gospel, intended the idea of repentance to have a wider meaning. He viewed sin as broader than morality. It pervaded every aspect of life.

There is nothing to suggest, for example, that first century Jews had notoriously bad moral standards. History does not record that there were special problems in Jewish society that only repentance, in a moral sense, could solve.

No, John's call to repentance covered the waterfront. It was a call to change the things that got in the way of being what God wanted the people to be. It applied to their lives in every way then, and it applies in the same way now.

The other area where John's view of repentance applies is in the church. In many ways John the Baptist is a good model for today's church as it seeks to recover its prophetic voice in an increasingly secular culture.

All we have to do is look around. We used to see crèches and manger scenes in public settings. Not any more. Now, it's Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

We also used to feel good about wishing someone Merry Christmas. Not any more. Now, unless we are with people we know well, society tries to make us feel guilty if we don't say Happy Holidays instead.

And this is a reality year around. Religion has been driven out of the public forum. We are expected to suppress our Christianity so that we don't offend people of other faiths, but no such conditions are applied to them.

Also, look at our schools. And here I speak of my experience in other states. I have not lived in Hancock County long enough to know if what I am about to say applies here. But I can tell you that elsewhere we see some of our schools mock religion while teaching that evolution is a fact. I have heard children say they were taught that America is responsible for most of the world's problems. Children are told if they bring a Bible to school they can't read it during school hours. And would someone please explain to me why some of the sex education courses that we see in some of our public school systems are necessary for students who have not yet even reached adolescence?

If the church does not proclaim our faith, no other institution in society will do so. If the church does not stand against this erosion of God's place in society, who will?

So, when today's Gospel calls us to turn around and prepare the way of the Lord, it sends a strong message to the church as well as to ourselves. The church also is called to do and be what John preached, and to reclaim its proper role in society.

And in this respect, leadership is not merely taking a public opinion poll to see what people want to do, and then helping them do it. If the church continually adjusts its standards to

accommodate the changing morality of society, then the church functions as an instrument rather than a leader of society, and undermines its own identity and leadership role.

Leadership in the church does not consist of reinterpreting God's will simply because some aspects of society have changed or become more vocal. Instead it means standing for the truth in the face of cultural pressures to treat it as no longer relevant. It means that the church must try to understand if there are areas where it must turn around so that it then can call the people to turn around.

IV.

Today's Gospel reading began by referring to the reign Tiberius as Emperor, to Pontius Pilate as Governor, and to Caiaphas as the high priest. During that time in history John the Baptist called people to repent, to change their ways, and to make U-turns to get ready for Jesus Christ

Two thousand years later George Bush is President, Haley Barbour is Governor, and Katharine Jefferts Schori is the Presiding Bishop. And the message has not changed. We as individuals and the church as an institution still are called to turn around, to get rid of those things that interfere with our relationship with God, and to live our lives according to his will rather than our own. *Amen.*