

## “Turning ‘Round Right”

A sermon based on Luke 3:1-6  
Delivered on Sunday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
At First Presbyterian Church, Urbana  
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In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” We know, as his followers, that searching is a fundamental aspect of faith. Saint Augustine knew this, and sought to explain the human longing for God by saying that God has made us for Godself, and that our hearts will be restless until they rest in God. Former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has written that “We long to know that we are addressed.”<sup>i</sup>

We long to know that there is a word from the Lord. A word of love, of grace, of forgiveness. Luke knew this, too. And so he began his telling of the Good News of Jesus Christ by declaring that “...the word of God came to John, the son of Zecharia, in the desert.”

Very carefully, Luke sets the stage for the in-breaking of God’s word into the world. Part of his intention may be, as first impressions suggest, that Luke is simply striving to date the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It all began when Tiberius was Caesar in Rome, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Philip was Tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was Tetrarch in Abilene. It was when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests.

But Luke, knowing how people long for a word from the Lord, also knew that we often look in the wrong places for that word from the Lord. In setting the stage, Luke declares that the long-awaited word from the Lord did not come from the high and mighty. It did not come from the wealthy and connected. It didn’t even come from any notable religious leaders.

Instead, the word of the Lord came to John, long-haired, scruffy, probably smelly, camel hair-wearing, locust-eating John, who lived not in any fashionable metropolitan area, but out in the desert. In other words, when the word of God came, it came in a place unexpected; which means, of course, that it might as well come here, too, as indeed it does.

Our task, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches, is to “receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts; and practice it in our lives.” (7.090) The question is how do we do this? How do we receive a word from the Lord? John proclaims that the answer is repentance.

Did you know that repentance is not a word that the Church invented? It comes from a nomadic people and time, a time prior to the creation of good roads and good maps. Traveling through the wilderness can be dangerous. It is easy to lose one’s way in a wilderness. One moment you think you know just where you are going. You become distracted, or your eyes glaze over with fatigue, and the next thing you know, you have no idea where you are.

Right away, you begin to scout around, looking to pick up the trail. Perhaps your heart rate begins to rise as you understand that you have lost control. But in time, if you are wise, you stop and confess, “I’m going in the wrong direction. I’m lost.” That’s step one in repentance. But you haven’t really begun to address the situation until you change your direction. That is step two in repentance.

For some reason, it is difficult for men to get to step one. In my family, when we are on a trip somewhere, and if I’m driving and I lose my sense of direction, Jean will pick up on this at some point. She will ask, “Did you miss a turn?” Having this gender-based defect which keeps me from being honest, I respond, “No, I’m just going to go a bit further.” Well, after going a bit further for awhile longer, she usually asks, “Do you think we should ask for directions?”

This is like John’s preaching in the wilderness. Until you reach a place where you admit you are lost, you don’t want to hear, “Don’t you want to ask for directions?” And of course, I always answer in the warmest of tones, “No, dear, that won’t be necessary.” Anything other than ask for directions. Men want to believe that we are self-reliant and in control. Perhaps men are not the only ones who can be this way.

But eventually, we come to our senses. We admit that we are lost. So we find someone who knows the way, and that one helps us get reoriented. That is step one.

It is one thing, though, to know the right direction. It is another entirely to set out in the right direction. Step two is to heed the wisdom of good direction. And it turns out to be so easy to set out on the right way, as long as you don't forget step one, the step that requires us to admit that we sometimes need someone else's directions, the step that requires us to admit that God's way is the best way, rather than our way.

That is repentance. It is a two-step adventure, that entails turning from the wrong way so that we can go in the right way. No amount of wishful thinking, scheming or resolutions will create repentance for you. You actually have to turn from the wrong road and travel down the right road.

So repentance does not depend on how we feel. It is not regret. Nor is it feeling sorry for something. **Repentance is a change of direction.**

Once we have repented, once we have responded to God's call, then God leads us home. Indeed, as Jesus declared in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, God comes running down the road to meet us. When the prodigal came to his senses and decided to return home, he found a welcome he had no way of anticipating. He discovered that his father had been watching for him, waiting for him to return. Before he even entered the city limits, who did he see but his father running down the road to meet him. That is how it is with repentance.

Luke tells us that John proclaimed that repentance is how the way is prepared for the Lord. When we repent, our pride is plowed down. As Isaiah wrote, "Human pride will lower it's eyes, human arrogance will be lowered,...and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day." (Isa. 2) We find that the Holy Spirit softens our hearts and our minds. We become teachable, humble, disciples. When we repent, we are freed from the power of our cares and concerns that restrict our vision and choke our faith.

Do you remember the parable of the seeds? Some of the seeds fail to produce because they fall among weeds and thorns. They grow up with the weeds and thorns, only to be choked.

Jesus said that those are the cares and concerns that grow up to preoccupy our hearts and minds so that we stop looking to Christ and trusting his way. Those cares and concerns make the way rough.

In repentance, we turn back to complete trust and reliance on Christ and his way. When we repent, we are freed from the anger that can overcome us when we feel threatened or when we do not get our way. In repentance, we remember what James wrote, "...your anger does not produce God's righteousness." (1:20)

When we repent, the valleys of our insecurities are filled in. We find that we are no longer disabled by lack of confidence, or our weaknesses, or our failures. We remember what Paul wrote, that our strength is made perfect in weakness.

When we repent, we are freed from our splendid isolation and incorporated into Christ's peaceful realm. That may be the greatest gift of repentance. Rather than walking the freedom road alone, we find that we share the journey with excellent traveling companions.

Which is not to say that we always enjoy traveling together. It is to say that repentance makes us part of Christ's body, and no part of the body can say to another part, "I don't need you." We do need each other.

Near the end of Steven Spielberg's film, *Lincoln*, there is one of my favorite scenes. The House of Representatives has been debating whether to approve the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to abolish slavery. A question about whether President Lincoln knows anything about peace delegates from the South looks like it might stall the vote.

A note is sent by runner from the House chamber to President Lincoln who is in his office in the White House. He responds with a note and sends the runner back. With the question addressed, the voting begins.

The tension mounts as the voting proceeds. But then, when the vote is complete, how do we know it? We know it as we return to Lincoln's office, see him standing in his office, and then turn, as if he has heard something. He walks to the window. Raising the window, we can hear the news together with him.

The news is being rung by bells, church bells. That is what good news sounds like, and they declared that we, as a nation, had repented. We had turned. We changed our direction.

*But to me heard afar  
it was starry music  
Angels' song, comforting  
as the comfort of Christ*

We were on the Freedom Road. Thanks be to God.

Staying on the right road is not easy. Our human natures are weak, and the temptations and seductions of our culture are strong. Sometimes our impatience gets the best of us. The upshot? We never finish repenting. None of us.

The Shakers sing a wonderful hymn that captures this life of repentance so well:

‘Tis the gift to be simple,  
‘tis the gift to be free,  
‘tis the gift to come down where you ought to be,  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
‘twill be in the valley of love and delight.

*Refrain:*

When true simplicity is gained,  
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed.  
To turn, turn will be our delight,  
'Til by turning, turning we come round right."

How is it that the way of the Lord is prepared? Bowing and bending and turning. Repenting. Not alone, by ourselves, but in community with one another.

So come, let us continue on down the road to Bethlehem. For Christ is the way. Christ goes with us on the way. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 4.