

Repentance
Isaiah 40:1-8
Luke 3:1-17
Second Sunday of Christmas

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Isaiah 40:1-8

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.

INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL LESSON

Our gospel lesson today is about John the Baptist in the wilderness. It's so familiar that it's easy to forget the story behind it. But we lose a lot if we do – it would be like hearing about George Washington without knowing about the American Revolution ... or Abraham Lincoln without knowing about slavery. So indulge me while I give the backstory to John the Baptist.

At that time, the Israelites were under the thumb of the Roman Emperor ... but it wasn't supposed to be this way. A thousand years before, God had promised King David that his descendants would reign forever. Then the foreign powers rolled in, wave after wave. First the Assyrians came and took the northern part of the kingdom. Then the Babylonians came and took the southern part of the kingdom. Even when the Persians came and let the

Israelites come back from exile, the foreign government still held control ... and after the Persians, then the Greeks, and now the Romans.

And the people wondered: would there ever be a “real” king of Israel again? Would David’s kingdom ever revive? Would the Messiah ever come to restore their former glory? Would Isaiah’s prophecy be fulfilled: that there would be a voice in their wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight in the desert a highway for their God?

Oh, lots of voices *claimed* to be the messenger of God’s will. There were revolts off and on for years, and would-be prophets, and religious zealots. But among all those voices, for many, John the Baptist’s voice rose above the noise. And this is how his story went:

Luke 3:1-17

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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

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? 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. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He 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, and be satisfied with your wages.”

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

It’s an odd time in our country. In the midst of the presidential debates and candidates competing with one another, there seems to be a bit of despair about who we’ll end up with. I was at dinner the other night with dear friends, and I confess that I almost fell over when my staunch-Republican friend admitted: if Donald Trump is nominated, he’ll vote for Hillary Clinton. That would be like my staunchly Democratic friends saying they’d vote for Marco Rubio or Ted Cruz.

That feeling of waiting for someone to show up to lead is just what the Israelites were experiencing in John the Baptist’s day. There was plenty of cynicism over corruption, plenty of *ennui* over what difference anyone could make in their daily lives, plenty of hand-wringing over where their country was heading. And it strikes me that John the Baptist’s word to his people may be just the word we need today.

I must admit, he doesn’t start on a happy note. “You brood of vipers!” he shouts: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” John the Baptist is

awfully hard on them. Like a drill sergeant in front of his flabby troops, John's main complaint is that they've become complacent – that these people have grown passive. He warns them that they're mistaken to wait for someone else to show up to solve the world's problems. And he reminds them that *their* behavior matters – and there's much more that's needed beyond showing up.

That's a word we need to hear, isn't it? Every time we watch the news or read the paper, it's tempting to wonder when real leaders are going to show up. And John the Baptist says to us: stop waiting. You're it.

So in this season of New Year's resolutions, when we're looking at our own lives and thinking it's time to get in shape, or it's time to get our financial health in order ... what if we looked deeper than that? What if we resolved to get our leadership health in order – our ethical and spiritual health – so that God can use us to the fullest extent possible?

It's possible. And John the Baptist offers a place to start.

Notice how very specific and very practical John gets, offering pointed advice for particular people:

- When the crowds ask, “What should we do?” he says, if you have two coats, give one of them to someone who needs it; and if you have extra food, do the same too.
- When the tax collectors ask, “What should we do?” he says, don't add a made-up surcharge to line your pockets; collect just what is due to the government.
- When the soldiers ask, “What should we do?” he says, don't extort money by threats or false charges; be satisfied with your wages.

Getting our leadership health in order isn't generic, it's particular. It's a little like going to your physician or financial planner for an annual check-up. There's nothing generic about it: it's about your particular blood pressure, about your particular BMI, about your particular savings rate, about your particular financial needs. So the advice is going to vary from individual to individual.

But we also need honest critique, don't we? So when your doctor say, "you're overweight" or your financial planner saying "you're living way beyond your means," it's not very pleasant. But the truth matters, doesn't it? And it's no less true just because we choose to ignore it.

So the first step for our "leadership resolutions," John implies, is to look honestly at our daily lives. Where are we *particularly* healthy, and where are we *particularly* going off-track?

How do we measure? It's really basic, but like blood pressure and heart rate, we can start with the two most significant "tests" – the ones Jesus tells us are the most important in God's hopes for us. First, we lead best when we're loving the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. And second, we lead when we're loving our neighbors as ourselves. So let's take a look at each of those two commandments.

How do we measure whether we're loving the Lord with all our heart and mind and soul and strength? If we're not putting God first, we're putting something else there, whether it's wealth, achievement, looks, popularity, education, or even usefulness. Even great things can become idols when we

put them ahead of God. That's the first measure of our health: are we humbling ourselves before the Lord? Are we relying on God to give us purpose, direction and meaning? And how do we do that better?

John the Baptist reminds that us that loving the Lord isn't just about *belonging* to the church – any more than it was about his original audience claiming their heritage as “children of Abraham.” No, loving the Lord requires action; it requires commitment.

It's a little like joining the gym at the beginning of the year – it doesn't really matter unless you show up, does it? Our leadership health grows stronger the more we get to worship on a regular basis, exercise daily Scripture or meditation, join a Bible study group – I'm filled each week by mine – or even, breathe in the beauty of God's creation Being *intentional* about God's presence in our lives ... being *habitual* about exercising our devotion to God – it changes who we are and what matters to us, as much as being intentional about our diet changes our physical well-being.

And how are we doing with Christ's second measure of well-being: loving our neighbor as ourselves? It may mean giving a sizeable portion of our income to charity. It may mean spending time with our vulnerable family members, whether growing children or again parents. It may mean volunteering with Reading Power or Soup Kitchen or Rummage or PADS, loving the mentally ill or physically handicapped by serving on non-profit boards, raising money for education or health care, or creating jobs for those who desperately need them. It may even mean following John the Baptist's advice literally: getting rid of the stuff in our closets or pantries – extra coats,

extra gloves, extra cans of soup, extra pasta – and giving it to people who don't have any. Or shedding our power that comes at someone else's expense, like the bonus we presume we deserve, even if we didn't earn it, or the power we wield for our own benefit, instead of serving the public good. What if we *saw* our entitlement and privilege – and chose to use our authority as an avenue for serving our neighbor instead?

What difference does it make whether we make and keep these resolutions? It's not just about what it does for *us*. What's at stake is God's vision for the world. It's about whether the dark valleys of poverty and inequality will ever be lifted up. It's about whether the crooked paths will ever be cleaned up and made straight. It's about whether the rough places people experience, of loneliness and fear, of hopelessness and shame will ever be smoothed out. That's what's at stake. And we're invited – we're actually invited by the Lord God – to make a difference. To be ambassadors of Christ, bearing the light of Jesus into the darkness of this world.

There's a lot riding on us. I don't know about you, but I'm thinking it's time, this new year to turn – to repent – to commit myself to get my leadership self in shape.