

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. ³He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴Just as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low.

The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth.

⁶And everyone will see the salvation of God.”

The Voice

I.

Sweet, sweet sounds fill the air.

I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that's what comes to mind when you think of the appropriate sounds for Advent and Christmas. Whether it's traditional Christmas carols that come to mind or the rock guitars and electric violins of Trans Siberian Orchestra punctuated by flames in a frenzied stage show, it's at least melodic.

Most people love the songs of Advent and Christmas. They range from the sacred to the secular. They're merry and bright. Some make you think. Some were written just to bring cheer in the middle of a busy season.

In fact, if you're like me, whenever you hear the words of today's Gospel, or Isaiah 40 which is quoted here, one of those songs starts playing in your head. “Every Valley Shall Be Exalted” from Handel's Messiah popped into my head as soon as I read today's text.

But other sounds come to mind one reads this text, too. There's the relentless thudding of a jackhammer drilling into huge boulders, and the explosive charges that blast the rocks apart. Mighty diesel engines roar as bulldozers scrape the broken rock and stone and dirt that was once a hill out of the way as it gets leveled to the proper grade. More diesel sounds as excavators grab mighty fistfuls of excess debris to drop it into waiting dump trucks so it can be hauled to low spots that need some fill.

The dulcet tones of a baritone belting out “every valley must be exalted” is drowned out by the urgent shouts of a foreman yelling instructions at those operating the machines. This load needs to go over there. That grade has to be perfectly leveled before the paving equipment can start to do the final work as asphalt is laid and rolled smooth by more roaring diesel engines.

II.

Today's Theme of the Day said: **A real Christmas is rooted in repentance.** The call to repent is not a demand to do something more. It is a gracious invitation to set down our work to make way for Christ's work.

“Doing something more” describes a typical attitude during the season leading up to Christmas, doesn't it? The month of December is filled with “doing.” There are special

cookies and cakes to be made. There is decorating to be done. There are parties at work; parties at home; parties with family. Even at the special Children's Service, mom and dad and grandpa and grandma have their phones out, recording little Johnny and Suzie for posterity rather than listening to the voices of children who have prepared the Christmas gospel for them.

The voice of the foreman cuts through. "Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low. The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth" (Luke 3:4-5, EHV).

Rather than doing something more, we put our work away to make way for Christ's work. That's what we just heard from the Theme of the Day. Repentance is the removal of barriers between us and God.

There is sin and it's crooked paths. You have *your* personal pet sins that cause you problems, just as I have mine. While the particulars might be different, the problem is still the same: we make the same dumb mistakes again and again. Sin separates people from God. The crooked path makes it impossible to find him.

There is also a mountain of pride. It's easy to look at your achievements and think they have all come about because of your own power and skill. The mountain of pride is so high you can't see the God who gave you all that you are and all that you have.

Valleys of guilt and despair separate the mountains of pride. You get knocked down a peg, and then you focus on all your flaws and faults. They are overwhelming. The valleys get deep, and you begin to despair. God can't possibly forgive you because of what you have done and who you are.

III.

John the Baptist "Went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3, EHV). The voice cuts through like jackhammers and bulldozers.

The voice was an interesting character. Where do you go when you have the most important news to share? It might seem logical to go into the heart of Jerusalem. He could go to the temple courts and announce that the long-awaited Messiah was coming. But the religion of Judaism had become corrupted. People were looking for a political Messiah. They thought the One God had promised would lead their nation and make them powerful and respected again. Religion had become secularized.

So it was that John didn't go into the heart of Jerusalem with his message. He went into the wilderness. It didn't seem logical, but people flocked to hear him.

What they heard was that *John* isn't the one who is going to solve all the problems. He's just laying the groundwork. He's just preparing the way of the Lord.

John didn't demand that people do something more. That's the Law. Remember all those barriers? Pride, sin, guilt and despair? What the Law shows is that it is hopeless.

John straightened the path to Jesus, who said: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6, EHV). Jesus took the pride and sin and guilt and despair of all people and paid for them on the cross.

"And everyone will see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6, EHV). That's what John was doing out there preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins: he was showing people the salvation of our God in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the reason for the season of Advent and Christmas.

Prepare your heart again for the great good news that God has dealt with sin once and for all with the greatest gift ever given—the gift of Jesus, who takes away the sin of the

world.

IV.

I suppose it's easy to get distracted this time of year. It's easy to put the emphasis on family and friends, on presents and treats.

Get out your road building equipment. Get out your jackhammers and bulldozers and dump trucks and pavers. Be the John the Baptist of your circle of friends and family. Remind them of what is really important: remind them of the Savior.

Rather than heavy construction equipment, you can use Joy to the World and Silent Night. You can use the prophecies from the Old Testament and show how they were fulfilled in the whole beautiful history of Christmas in Luke 2.

Let the sweet, sweet sounds fill the air—the sweet sounds of repentance for the forgiveness of sins that the Lord our God has brought us. Prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.