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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/6/2015, The Second Sunday of Advent  
Luke 3:1-6  
Hunger for Repentance

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The opening verse of this morning's Gospel Lesson begins with historical reference, because the story of Jesus is no fairy tale. So, the verse speaks of prominent political and religious leaders. But then the text turns to the real subject of importance: the word of God coming to John the Baptist:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; (Luke 3:1-2, RSV)

My sermon this morning is about spiritual hunger. I want us to try to reckon with the perhaps counter-intuitive notion that there are people in our city who desire to repent and mend their ways. They do hunger and thirst for righteousness – not just in society, but also in themselves. They are waiting for the call to repentance and to holiness of life. They are waiting for a preacher like John the Baptist.

Here hangs our John the Baptist banner. He is featured in the Gospel Lessons for both this Sunday and next. The season of Advent lifts up two heroes of the Gospel story: Mary, the mother of our Lord, and John the Baptist. They both played important roles in the story of Jesus. When the Lord called upon these two — Mary and John — they both stepped up to the plate and took their swings. They made themselves available to serve the Lord, and we can be grateful for their part in the Gospel. Today and next Sunday, we focus on John the Baptist. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent we turn to Mary.

I think that John's heart must have been overflowing with thoughts and emotions. Today's Gospel Lesson says that "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness." So John was not preaching according to his own vague notions, but was filled with the very word of God. But that divine Word, both back then and now, is complex – teeming with both hope and the call to repentance. John preached good news: he preached that "one mightier than I cometh" (Luke 3:16), and he preached that it was appropriate for people to repent and to try to make themselves ready for Christ. I think that both messages are good for us.

John preached that something momentous was afoot — something divine was about to happen. John the Baptist was the one who cried out in the wilderness, “Watch out! Things are about to change!” John was moved by the Word of God. There was a burden on his heart. He knew that God was about to stir things up on earth. He knew that a Greater One than him was close at hand.

Now, my friends, we hear John’s cry in the wilderness and are tempted to think that these are matters that concerned that generation back then. John was preparing the way for the ministry of Jesus — a ministry that took place among an ancient people two thousand years ago.

But the holy season of Advent invites us to place ourselves amidst the crowds that left the city and went out into the wilderness to hear John preach. With sacred imagination, we can place ourselves within that desert congregation. Or, we can go the other way around: we can picture John the Baptist being here in our congregation preaching to us. We can picture me stepping aside and John, with his wild beard, his camel-hair garment, and his strange diet of locusts and honey (Matthew 3:4) preaching to us from this pulpit. The trick of Advent is to take the preaching of John to heart for ourselves.

And in the end, doing so is not so fanciful. When John preached that people should repent and mend their ways because God was at hand, this is a preaching that expands and includes us too. Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, is drawing nearer and nearer to us, day by day. He draws near in many ways. During Advent we wait for him at Christmastime. We wait to celebrate again that our God has drawn near to humanity in Jesus Christ. But also during Advent, we await the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in power and glory – a proclamation that is akin to John the Baptist’s preaching that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For all we know, Jesus could come again soon — maybe even this afternoon. We wait for God to draw near to us in the Blessed Sacrament. And we await for God to draw near to us in our final hour. One way or another, each of us is hastening on toward an encounter with our Maker. John is a plain preacher who says to us, “Make yourself ready for God. With increasing devotion and earnestness, make yourself ready for God.”

The Evangelists agree that John was a preacher of repentance:

<sup>1</sup>In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, <sup>2</sup>And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matthew 3:1-2, KJV)

John taught the world that when “the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” it is appropriate for us to repent. It is right for us to change the direction of our lives, to forsake sin, to turn toward God, to do what we can to make ourselves ready and available for him.

John preached repentance and amendment of life as the appropriate and rational step in life for those who will soon be meeting God. Who knows all of John’s theology? He might have felt that all human repentance is inadequate and a

poor thing that leaves us unworthy to stand before God. He might have thought that, and he would have been right if he did believe it. Nonetheless, he was a preacher of repentance. The kingdom of heaven is coming, he said, and it is high time that we turn our lives around and direct ourselves more toward our Maker. Repentance and amendment of life are necessary for us, even if our repentance proves inadequate and must be renewed each day.

Hunger for such preaching

Interestingly, John's call to repentance did not make him an unpopular preacher. St. Mark says that even fancy city folk traveled out into the wilderness to hear John and to be baptized by him:

<sup>4</sup>John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. <sup>5</sup>And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:4-5, KJV)

There was spiritual hunger in the land in those days, including in the great city Jerusalem. I believe there is spiritual hunger in the land today too.

To begin developing this point, let me refer to the Question and Answer session after the recent Erasmus lecture at the Union League Club here in town. This year's lecture was given by Ross Douthat<sup>1</sup>, a conservative Op-Ed columnist for the *New York Times*.

Douthat's lecture bore the title *The Crisis of Conservative Catholicism*. It is available online.<sup>2</sup> I cannot find the lecture Q&A session online and so I must rely on my memory. But if I remember right, Douthat had something interesting to say about what he called "bad Catholics."

He was not complaining about "bad Catholics." In fact, his complaint went the other way round. His complaint was about watered-down versions of church teaching that were so liberal that they essentially eliminate the notion of a "bad Catholic."

Let's generalize this, to speak of "bad Christians" — not just bad Catholics, but bad Christians. Perhaps there are such Christians. Alas, I fear that I am too often one of them. I mean, the ordinary Christian who comes to church, sits quietly in the pew, who sits there mindful that he or she falls short of official church teaching. He's a bad Christian, she's a bad Christian.

What that means is that the person acknowledges that there is still work to be done in his spiritual life. Not all is well — not yet.

The person even acknowledges that if he walks out of church, gets hit by a bus, and flies off to heaven, he is in for some trouble, she is in for some trouble. At

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced "DOW-thut."

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.firstthings.com/media/the-crisis-of-conservative-catholicism>

least, he is going to have to hope for some major mercy when he must bend the knee before Jesus.

Now, what worries Douthat, if I understand him right, is what happens if we simply do away with the notion of a bad Christian. Suppose we so temper and moderate church teaching that no one runs afoul of it anymore. No one needs to sit quietly in the pew mindful that he falls short of church teaching because the church no longer challenges us. There is little left to fall short of.

Would that make things better? I do not think it would. Certainly I could be wrong about this, but I think there are people in our town who are hungering for the truth, even if it makes them feel bad, even if means that they have some repenting and mending of their ways ahead of them. Tame preaching threatens to leave us parched. The continual proclamation, “I’m okay, you’re okay” just does not suit the soul when we know deep in our hearts that we have not loved God enough and have not loved our neighbors enough.

Well, one thing you could count on John the Baptist for was that he would not be a tame preacher. Next Sunday we will look at some of the details of his preaching. We will listen to him speak of such things as “you generation of vipers,” and “even now the axe is laid to the root of the tree,” and “bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance.” We will also hear more moderate things — practical exhortations to holiness of life for soldiers, for example.

Such preaching is part of the Gospel. The *word of God* came to John, and he preached in the manner he did. This seems to have been pleasing to God. Perhaps you and I sense a need for it too.

So, if you are not satisfied with the state of your soul, do not give up. It is okay to sigh and to long for standards of holiness that you do not even live up to yet. It is alright to join with the Psalmist of old in praying for a new path in life — for ways that cohere more with the will of God:

<sup>5</sup>O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes! (Psalm 119:5, KJV)

It is alright to want more of God’s law, not less:

<sup>18</sup>Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law. (Psalm 119:18, KJV)

Let me conclude with this point: the preaching of repentance was a secondary part of John’s preaching, but it was a true part. His primary subject was Jesus. John was at his best — John was really hitting his stride — when he pointed to Jesus of Nazareth and spoke of the Lamb of God:

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29, KJV)

It is the fact that Jesus “taketh away the sin of the world” that gives us hope that even if our repentance should be imperfect, nonetheless it is good that you and I get ready to deal with Jesus. The preaching of John the Baptist can be fierce, with his images of the axe being laid at the root of the trees and the chaff being burned with “unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12), but his fierce preaching seems to be the shadow side of a more tender message. It is as if John can hardly restrain himself, and his words come flowing forth like a hot volcano sometimes, but his essential message is one of love. It is almost like a father asking the children to obey mother.

That was part of my life when I was a young father. It might have been part of your life too when you were young. Day after day when I was saying goodbye to our boys and heading off to work, I would say to them, “Sons, take good care of your mother.” Looking back, it was almost like a prayer. It was like final words, repeated day after day, in case something should happen that day, and I would not make it home — hit by a bus or whatever. It was a heartfelt appeal that my sons should so order their lives that they were taking good care of the one who especially loved them in this world — their mother.

So it is with you and me: the One who especially loves us in this world is Jesus. You know that. You depend on that, both now and in eternity. Jesus is the One who means much to you, because you mean much to him. So John the Baptist asks us to take good care of Jesus. Let us not disobey him. Let us not disappoint him. At least let us *try* to neither disobey nor disappoint him. Let us learn more of him. Let us not be content with our existing picture of him, but try to learn more about him through the whole Bible and through the wisdom of the ages about our Lord.

The One about whom John the Baptist preached and the One for whom he prepared the way, is also the One who pronounces a blessing on those who are not yet satisfied with either the world or even themselves:

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after  
righteousness: for they shall be filled. (Matthew 5:6, KJV)

To this Greater One, who blesses those who hunger and thirst, be the glory,  
with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.