

March 9, 2014
The Life of John the Baptist

John's Message
Luke 3:1-15

Opening words: Lent is the Christian season of preparation prior to Easter. Excluding Sundays, it lasts for 40 days. The number forty is one of those sacred numbers in the Bible. It rained for 40 days and nights in Noah's story. The Hebrews wandered for 40 years before entering into the Promised Land. Jesus fasted 40 days before being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The resurrected Jesus walked the face of this world for 40 days before ascending into heaven. This year Easter is April 20, so Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, was March 5.

Lent is the time to examine yourself and discover what is holding you back from a closer walk with God. How easy it is to see the imperfections in others and be blind to our own. We look good next to the cast of characters on the evening news wearing the orange jump suits. However, comparing ourselves to Jesus is another story. Our imperfections are suddenly clear. The Wesleyan tradition has always encouraged us to strive toward perfection. We should never be satisfied with our present state, because none of us will ever be perfect.

We are going to spend the season of Lent looking at the life of John the Baptist. We stated looking at John's life on Wednesday night. If you were with us then, you will remember that we looked at his birth. In this morning's text, he is no longer an infant. As a matter of fact, he is 30 years old. May God give you ears to hear this morning's Gospel lesson, Luke 3:1-15. Let me call this message *John's Message*.

Luke 3:1-15 ¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. ⁵Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. ⁶And all people will see God's salvation.'" ⁷John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

¹¹ John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

¹³ "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

¹⁴ Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

Jesus once said, "*It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*" If you have heard that verse before, say, "**Amen!**"

Gipsy Smith, in The Bible Friend, tells the story of an experience he had in South Africa. According to the story, a Dutchman came to one of his services and was convicted of his sin. The next morning that same Dutchman got up and went to the home of an acquaintance, carrying an old watch. When the two met, he handed the old watch over and asked, "Do you recognize this?" "Why, yes," answered the other. "Those are my initials; that is my watch. I lost it eight years ago. How did you get it, and how long have you had it?" "I stole it," was the reply. "What made you bring it back now?" "I was converted last night," was the answer, "and I had to bring it back."

That story reminds us that repentance is more than simply believing. True repentance involves action. In verse 10, the crowd asked the question for us all, "What must we do?" That is not an isolated case. Anyone who has ever sincerely repented has asked the same question. What must you do? With this thought in mind, let us look at this morning's scripture lesson.

On Wednesday night we looked at the birth of John the Baptist. Do you remember the story? His parents were Zechariah and Elizabeth. They are remembered in scripture as being "upright" in the sight of God. If any couple deserved to have children, it was them. They would have made wonderful parents. The problem was, they spent their entire lives waiting for their first child, a boy. They named him John. Zechariah and Elizabeth's baby did what all babies do. He grew up.

According to this morning's text, the year is approximately 25 A.D., which makes John approximately 30 years old. He moved out of the city of Jerusalem and has moved into

the wilderness. Constantly on the move, he covers the country around the Jordan and delivers one message, repentance. Many came out to that remote location to be baptized by him. They were not greeted with a friendly, "Hello!" They were greeted with a stern warning. He called them a "brood of vipers" and tells them of the coming judgment. He encourages everyone to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. Using your sanctified imagination, you can see him. He is not using a small amount of water, like infant baptism. He used a large amount of water. As a matter of fact, he held them under the water to wash away all their sins. I am not so sure his generation completely understood, but Luke did. In quoting the prophet Isaiah, Luke announces to the world that John was the forerunner of the Messiah. Listen to what I am about to say.

The theme of repentance did not originate with John. It did not end with John. Did you know repentance is referred to 6,735 times in the Bible? Sometimes it is individuals and sometimes it is whole groups. How many of those stories can you remember? The Bible is filled with them.

Do you remember the story of Hosea? It is a story of repentance. He lived in the middle of the eighth century BC, during the tragic days of the end of the northern tribe. He was a prophet of God, who got an unusual assignment. He was told by God to go out and marry an adulterous woman. (That is the Biblical way of saying she was a whore.) They had three children in their marriage. The first was a boy, whose name means "God scatters." The second was a girl, whose name means "I will no longer love you." Their third child was a second boy, whose name means "I am not your God." Let me ask you three questions. Do you think those children liked their names? Why did God tell Hosea to marry a prostitute? Why did he have him name his children those names? Because, every day Hosea played the part of God, and every day Gomer played the part of Israel. God continued to love, and Gomer continued to be unfaithful. As the drama played out, God was confident that the people would get the message, but they didn't. They failed to repent.

Do you remember the story of Jonah? It is a story of repentance. God told him to go to Nineveh. That was in the Middle East. The reluctant prophet doesn't want to go to Nineveh for one reason. He doesn't like them. Actually, he is afraid to go to Nineveh because the people might listen and repent. You know the story. Jonah runs in the opposite direction and heads toward Tarshish, Spain. The problem is, you can't run from God. In the end, he goes to Nineveh and his great fear happens. The people of that great city repent. The last time we saw Jonah, he was sitting under a tree having a pity party. Why is it we have such a hard time with mercy when the recipients aren't like us? Repentance isn't just found in the Bible. It is found in our world.

When I was in seminary, I served a small membership church outside of Danville, Kentucky. One day, I was preaching on the theme of repentance. At the close of the sermon the crowd sang the last hymn, "I Surrender All." In the middle of the middle verse, I yelled out, "STOP!" I gave everyone a jolt and reminded them that Christ could

come back that fast. Were they ready for the second coming? Were they ready to die? Had they repented of their sins? Did they know Jesus as their Lord and Savior? No one needs to spend eternity in hell. After the benediction, I stood at the back door and said, "Good-bye!" People seemed to appreciate my effort. One guy named Fred Sharp looked at me and said, "Preacher, that was good this morning. Those sinners need to repent!" Then, he winked and went home. I am not John the Baptist, but I can talk about repentance. My effort was not unique to me. Anyone can talk about forgiveness.

I was driving through downtown Youngstown, and someone told me I needed to repent. It was the day after the war in Iraq started. Everything was normal. The traffic was moving through the metropolis. The only thing abnormal about that day was a man standing in the middle of the divide. He was a wild un-groomed character holding a homemade sign. He yelled at me to read his sign. Written in large black print on a white poster board were these words: REPENT! THE END IS NEAR! Let's just be honest. There is nothing original about the topic of repentance. John was not the first and he was not the last to deliver that message. If you agree, say, "**Amen!**"

However, what makes this story stand out is that people do repent. The Holy Spirit must have been rolling that day. John reminds them they were going to be held accountable for their lives. They can do better. They must do better and live for God. John's words do not fall on deaf ears. The people hear them and respond. You can say they were convicted. The old way of living for themselves wasn't good enough. They began to share their clothes and their food. They began to be fair in their business practices. They stopped exploiting their position of authority. It is amazing how the combination of mercy and accountability can change people.

In 2001, Tim Goeglein started running the White House Office of Public Liaison, providing him almost daily access to then President George Bush for seven years. Then it all ended abruptly on February 29, 2008. A well-known blogger revealed the startling fact that 27 out of 39 of Goeglein's published articles had been plagiarized. By mid-afternoon the next day, Goeglein's career in the White House was over. Goeglein, who admitted his guilt, said that this began "a personal crisis unequalled in my life, bringing great humiliation on my wife and children, my family, and my closest friends, including the President of the United States." Goeglein was summoned to the White House to face the President. Once inside the Oval Office, Goeglein shut the door, turned to the President and said, "I owe you an..." President Bush simply said: "Tim, you are forgiven." Tim was speechless. He tried again: "But sir..." The President interrupted him again, with a firm "Stop." Then President Bush added, "I have known grace and mercy in my life, and you are forgiven." After a long talk, a healing process was launched for Goeglein, which included repentance, reflection, and spiritual growth." That story is not a story about politics. It is not a story about Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives. However, it is a story about mercy and accountability. It is a story about repentance. Today, Tim Goeglein is a Vice President with Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

When I was in school, I lived in a community near the seminary; Nicholasville, Kentucky. I lived in an apartment that wasn't the best. I was always spraying for roaches and cleaning out the mouse trap. I only lived there for one reason, it was cheap. I wasn't the only student in that complex; there were others. I made some wonderful friends during that year. One of the blessings of that year was getting to know the apartment manager, Duke. He and his wife, Diane, were wonderful Christian people. They were not afraid to share their faith or their stories prior to their conversion. Duke loved to share his wild past with us innocent seminary students. Every story ended with a big laugh and Duke would say, "Forgive me, Jesus!" One night we asked Duke how he came to know Jesus? His story began like all his stories. It was late at night and he had been drinking too much. He and Diane had gotten into a big fight and he left mad. He jumped in his truck and started driving. He had his foot to the floor and almost fell asleep. Duke said out of nowhere, he heard a voice. He was alone, so he checked his radio. It was off, and he heard a voice again. He looked over to the passenger seat and there was Jesus. The Master looked at him and said, "Duke, you are going to kill yourself. You have a good heart. Pull over and do something with your life." Duke said, "What else could I do? I pulled over. I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. And slept it off in the weeds." When he got home the next morning, he expected another ugly scene with Diane. Instead, she told him she had accepted Jesus too. It is a story of mercy and accountability.

This is the season of Lent. It is a time of self-examination. Don't compare yourself to the characters in the orange suits on the evening news. Compare yourself to Jesus and discover your imperfections. Have I told you lately you are going to be held accountable for your life? Maybe this is a good time for you to repent? Jesus came to save sick people, like us!

Will you pray with me?