

“THE TERROR CHILD”

Luke 3:1-6 December 8, 2024

When my children were younger one of my favorite back to school commercials was by Staples, the office supply store. It showed a father merrily dancing through the Staples store with his shopping cart and the background music playing **“It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”** In contrast to their father’s joy are his son and daughter, slowly walking several feet behind him and looking miserable at the thought of summer’s end. One blogger wrote, **“My favorite part of parenting is after I drop my kids off at school. I’m kidding. It’s after they go to bed.”**

It’s not that parents don’t love their children, but it’s nice to have a break from parenting, especially if you have one of those children. You know the one who makes even the simple tasks seem like a battle, or the drama queen who exaggerates every situation, or the strong will child who constantly pushes the boundaries, or the kid who thinks the rules don’t apply to them. If they see a toy they take it, regardless of whether another child was playing with it. These are the children whose schoolteacher doesn’t mind the child being absent but would never say it out loud. Labels aside, these children make life challenging.

I imagine that John the Baptist was a bit of a challenging child. He came from a good family, albeit older parents. But somewhere along the line John decides to leave mainstream society and go live in the wilderness. He wore camel hair clothing and ate wild honey and grasshoppers. I imagine he was a bit scruffy around the edges. You know

every parent's hope for their child. On top of his odd lifestyle, John boldly called people names and went around telling people to change their lives or you're going to be swept away. Eventually, his fire and brimstone method got him tossed in jail and cost him his life.

John knew how to make a scene and yet the people flocked to see him by the hundreds. Why, and what does this problem child have to teach us on this second Sunday of Advent?

I. THE WORD OF THE LORD

Luke begins John the Baptist's story by recounting the whose who of his day. **"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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."**

Why give this list of political and religious rulers? For two reasons. One it gives the story of John and Jesus a backdrop, a historical context. No matter what your opinion of them, there is no denying that these were two people who existed in real history. They were not the imagination of a gifted storyteller.

Secondly, after listing the rulers of the day, Luke writes these important words, **"the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."** By doing this, Luke raises the question, who is really in

charge of the world. These leaders may appear to be in charge, given their military, economic, and positional authority. But there is one who is coming who is the real King of the world, and no one is fit to tie his sandals. The word came in contrast, in spite of, and as an affront to all the worldly powers and authority.

Notice where this **Word of God** came to John; **in the wilderness** – not a desert necessarily, but to place beyond those developed by mankind. The wilderness represented chaos, yet it is the place where the people of Israel became a people of God in a covenant relationship, led by a prophet, received the Law to govern their relationships with each other and with the Lord. Out of the chaos of the world, God is once again bringing a creative word of new life.

One of the mistakes we make is to think the word of God is merely a message. Like John got a random text message or something. No, the Word of God is a living thing, that takes root and grows and spreads. This word makes things happen. There is a dynamic interaction taking place. John did not invent this word. The word came to him, chose him, called him, embraced John. It made him God's prophet. The Holy Spirit is acting through the Word to bring something new about.

John Wesley wrote in his journal, **"At five [a.m.] I preached once more on "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." They all devoured the Word. Oh, may that Word give them health for their souls and marrow for strong bones!"**

We are not to worship the Word of God, which is a problem with biblical literalism. Neither are we to take God's word to us for granted, neglect it, get too casual with it, or worse, tailor it to fit our comfort level. Advent calls us to treat the Word with respect, to read it frequently, to receive it, and to allow it to shape us, so that God might do a new thing in us.

II. REPENTANCE

Monday evening I had an **Administrative Commission** meeting at the **Covenant Presbyterian Church** in downtown Scranton. Getting to the church is easy enough, however when returning home you need make a hard left at Radisson Lackawanna Station Hotel. At that point **route 11, route 307, and President Biden Highway** all bunch together. You better know where you are going because you have to make a quick decision about where and when to turn. Fortunately, I chose well on Monday and was able to quickly connect with Highway 81.

However, that has not always been the case. On several occasions I did not choose well, mainly because my GPS couldn't keep up with the quick lane decisions. So, I had to turn around until I got back on the right path.

This turning around and getting on the right path, basically sums up the message of John. He **“went into all the region around the Jordan River, 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...”

John proclaimed a message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He was telling people to turn their lives around and instead turn toward the loving embrace of a forgiving God.

Stop going in the wrong direction, turn around, and get on the right path. Stop running away from God, do a U-turn and run towards God.

Repentance means more than just feeling sorry for your sins. It goes deeper than our feelings. To repent is to change how we think and live. The valleys are filled in, the mountains made low, the crooked made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.

In my Cleveland Church we built a **Mission Garden**. It has 16 12-foot raised garden beds. Throughout the summer they raise produce and give it to the local community food bank so people can have nutritious food to eat. Over the years we would purchase **soil test strips** to monitor the PH balance of the garden beds. Some plants grow better in more acidic soil and others in more alkaline soil. Once tested we would adjust the soil with various products depending on what was being planted.

Advent is a season of testing the soil of our hearts. The testing kit of the heart and soul are the word of God and the life of Jesus. Are there hard places that need softened? Are we withholding forgiveness and

becoming bitter? Are we so busy and distracted that there is no room for God in our hearts? Are we living such shallow lives that our faith is only on surface and makes no real difference? Are we weighed down by grief either over a loss or past regret? What is going on inside here? Does something aspect of our lives need changed so that it brings us closer to God and more effective in our ministry? Advent invites people to repent, to receive forgiveness, and go a different direction.

III. THE SALVATION OF GOD

In the hilarious book, **The Watsons Go to Birmingham**, 10-year-old Kenny Watson is saved from the teasing of other children in an unexpected way. He recounts:

"Every once in a while, Momma would make me go to Sunday school with Joey. Even though it was just a bunch of singing and coloring in coloring books and listening to Mrs. Davidson, I had learned one thing. I learned about getting saved. I learned how someone could come to you when you were feeling real, real bad and could take all of your problems away and make you feel better. I learned that the person who saved you, your personal saver, was sent by God to protect you and to help you out.

"When the bigger one of the two boys who got on the bus late said to the driver in a real down-South accent, 'Thank you for stopping, sir,' I knew right away. I knew that God had finally gotten sick of me being teased and picked on all the time.

As I looked at this new boy with the great big smile and the jacket with holes in the sleeves and the raggedy tennis shoes and the tore-up blue jeans, I knew who he was. Maybe he didn't live a million years ago, and maybe he didn't have a beard and long hair, and maybe he wasn't born under a star, but I knew anyway; I knew God had finally sent me some help; I knew God had finally sent me my personal savior!

At the end of John's prophecy, we hear these words, "**...and ALL FLESH shall see the SALVATION of God.**" The good news of the gospel is that it is for **ALL**, everybody, the whole world. All will see the salvation of God enfleshed in Jesus the Christ. Advent is about preparing to see Jesus among us, salvation with skin on.

However, I think we struggle with this idea of salvation because we often limit salvation to only our souls or our sins. But Salvation is for so much more. The Oxford Companion to the Bible states that "the primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words translated "salvation" is nonreligious. The Hebrew words usually come from a military context, and refer to victory over evil or rescue from danger in this life. And in the gospels, it is often physical healing that people seek from Jesus - relief from blindness, paralysis, leprosy. When he says to them that their faith has saved them, it is the Greek word for "**made you well**" that is employed. Salvation means rescue from every trouble, including being saved from our sins.

This morning we lit **the Candle of Peace**. Peace and Salvation are closely connected. The peace of God makes us whole, the salvation of God makes us whole, and Jesus came lived to make people whole physically, spiritually, communally, and mentally. Advent is the season to prepare people for Jesus and we do this when we are messengers of peace instead of conflict, good news instead of bad news, wholeness instead of brokenness, and salvation instead of destruction.

Advent is a call to new life, a people set free, to be transformed into the image of the one who is our salvation. No matter what kind of child you were growing up, or what kind of childhood you may have had, the good news is this. Jesus has come to transform your past self and claim you as his very own beloved child. Forgiven, chosen, and called. May the Word of God fill you this day with perfect peace. Amen.

Luke 3:1-6

¹In 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 Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler 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 region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

⁴as 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.

⁵Every 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;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.