

Sermon: Repent

Luke 3:1-6

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The words we have read from Luke 3 are strange. Luke spends a lot of space to make clear in what time, under what political leaders, John the Baptist was called to start his ministry. For us, who can hardly think of much else than political and religious leaders this days, Luke may have a message.

1 Politics

Why so much stress on this? It does not sound spiritual to be bothered about politics.

Luke names the rulers of the earth, Roman and Jewish, Emperors and local rulers, secular and religious. We hear of Tiberius, emperor in Rome. We hear of Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea. Then we have Herod, and his brother Philip. Another local ruler, Lysanias, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas.

These names help us a bit with dating the beginning of the ministry of John. We cannot be very precise, but it must have been between 26 and 28 AD. By supplying us with this very concrete context and date, Luke makes clear, the story of the Gospel is real history. It is not a fairy tale that starts with 'once upon a time there was'.

In firmly anchoring the Gospel story in history, Luke prevents John and his message from being made into a sort of myth, or into a sentimental Christmas story. It is not about emotions only – it is about the facts. What really happened. The impact of the events that are unfolding in the story are very much *in this* world, in the *real life* of us human beings.

During these days of Advent, when we re-enact the expectation of Israel for the Redeemer and when we look forward to the return of our Lord, we focus on what *really* happened and what *will really* happen in the end of our history.

But Luke does not only does not name Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas to teach us about the time of John's appearance, but rather he want to show us the sharp contradiction between those leaders and the work of God through John and Jesus.

Once a year, Jews all over the world celebrate a feast they call Purim. During that feast they celebrate how God saved them in the Persian Empire from an evil leader, Haman. You can read that story in the book of Esther. Haman wanted to destroy the people of God.

Each year, during the Purim Feast, the whole book of Esther is read to Jews. Whenever the name Haman is used (he occurs 54 times in the book of Esther), all people make loud noise and they boo... Children love it of course. Haman... boo!

I think the names that Luke mentions had the same effect on the listeners. Tiberius, emperor in Rome, boo!

Pontius Pilate, boo! Herod, and his brother Philip, boo! Lysanias, boo! Annas and Caiaphas! Away with those evil rulers, with those bad religious leaders. They were the people who killed John the Baptist, killed Jesus, killed many leaders of the church. Evil rulers, persecutors! Boo!

2. Comes John into the picture

Think of those mighty rulers, these big bad leaders who have central place in the drama of history. And then we have John.... Completely the opposite. A man from a poor village, dressed rather shabbily, eating dirty food, and roaming the desert.

John lived in evil days. Maybe he thought of emigration. "Let us get away from this bad empire... let us hope for a better life." He could have escaped far away, to serve his God in peace.

But what is so striking is that *God speaks* to John in his hard circumstances. God does not speak to those leaders of the world or through those rulers. He speaks to John in his desert.

God spoke to John, to hear the word of God and to speak about word of God to all people in the midst of normal daily life with all its ups and downs – under bad rulers.

And God speaks to us, his humble servants. Even if we feel as if we are in a desert and surrounded by evil. When life seems too bad, when things seem to take a down turn, God speaks.

Life may feel like a desert nowadays. Are you dry? Is your heart devastated by what happens? Your life may be a desert, things may go wrong.

Often the Bible portrays the desert as something bad, a place of destruction and dryness; and God promises, eventually, all deserts will bloom.

Our dry lives, they will one day overflow with God's presence. Waters of life, that is what Jesus promises. So God does not want deserts, he wants your life to be good, to be satisfied, fulfilled.

But in the Bible the desert also has a very positive aspect. It is the place where God speaks to people.

It is no coincidence that John spoke the word of God to Israel in the desert. The desert was the place where Israel got to know God and where the people of God faithfully responded to God.

It was into the Sinai Desert that God led Israel after they left Egypt, for meeting with him at the foot of Mount Sinai. It was in the desert that God was always feeding the nation with food and drink – as he feeds us today with bread and wine.

The desert is not a bad place to be – God has the habit of showing up and speaking. And if you feel dry

and devastated because of things in your own life, or because of what is happening in our nation, do not despair.

In the desert, God spoke to John and John spoke to the people. That is where God reached out to the people. They had to leave the comfort of their life in Jerusalem, to be confronted by God.

Do not despair about your desert, but rather, expect God to show up as he did in Israel in the time, yes, of Tiberius and Pontius Pilate, and Herod, and Caiaphas.

Sometimes we have to lose a bit more of the pleasantness of our lives, before we are able to meet with God... Maybe God has to strip us of our trust in politics, our trust in our money, our trust in our security that we find in our homes, our possessions... before we begin to trust in Him...

This does not mean we have to romanticize the desert, or the problems in our life and time. The desert is mean, and bad government is bad and we have to resist it. We have to stand up for truth, and for what is right. That is also what John did in the desert. He spoke strongly against religious leaders that came for the show and not to change their life.

3 Stand up for what is right

We have to stand up for what is good and right, not only in our personal lives, but also in the life of our nation.

And we do this, because we know the promises of God. Luke explains the message of John by quoting from the book of Isaiah:

[John is] A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.
The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.
And all people will see God's salvation.'

These words from Isaiah were originally a promise to Israel that was in exile in Babylon. The nation was in misery, but God promised to bring them home to Israel.

He promised to make the return to Israel an easy one, with a level road, so that the Israelites would not have to take a complicated route through the desert or have to climb over high arid mountains. *Thus*, they would see God's salvation.

Luke sees John in this light. You want to see God's salvation? Jesus Christ is coming!

This is interesting because in Isaiah, these words are not at all about Jesus. They are about JHWH, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Luke applies this to Jesus. No wonder as a church we believe that the Creator and Jesus Christ are inti-

mately related to one another in essence. They are one God.

John was preparing the people for the coming of God himself, in the midst of their desert. In the midst of a situation with evil rulers.

While we live in the midst of a world full of rulers we do not like, we wait for the coming into our life of the King of kings! And while there are evil religious rulers, like the high priests Annas and Caiaphas, we wait for the true High Priest. Our Lord Jesus Christ!

But in the midst of our desert, we do not just wait for God, patiently, to bring change: we also have a responsibility to be pro-active.

John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Do not be so focused on the rulers and religious leaders who refuse to serve God in Jesus Christ; focus on your own heart and life as well.

The repentance mentioned in Luke 3:3 is *metanoia* in Greek. The word means: have a new mind. Repent means: to change one's mind or purpose. We often put repentance together with sin, and that is good, but repentance means more than simply a struggle against personal temptation.

It is in the first place a paradigm shift, a transformation of our whole outlook, and of our way of life and our whole being.

In this case, there is a shift into the *forgiveness of sins*. Jesus' ministry is not simply about our own forgiveness, but also filling our world view with the need for forgiving others as well. This is salvation: when the world finally embraces forgiveness as the path of God. That is offered in Jesus Christ to us, as we offer it to others, even if they do wrong to us.

This repentance, the change of worldview, does not turn us into monks who retreat from the world; it makes us people who also confront what is evil in this world. It makes us speak out against those who rule badly and who oppress people.

But in a sense, yes we do have to be monks like John. We do not want to participate in the power games of this world; the rules of this evil empire shall not be our guiding light or morality. We do not let evil dictate our responses, our behaviour; we do not want to be part of that world of Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate. We have repented of this.

We are loved by God, we are forgiven, that is why our rule is love and forgiveness even for those that we so rightly can consider our enemies. But by all means, we do not adopt their methods.

This is a faith not for soft and weak people; it is a faith of heroes.

Repentance means believing in Christ, living a life in accordance with the Gospel, and doing works that have to do with righteousness.

It is a great shame that often those who truly desire to serve God, focus so much on their inner life only. While those who want to change this society into being

more righteous, seem to not care too much about God and the life of God in us.

Conclusion

Those two things should go completely together. Knowing that Christ forgives our sins and that he will return to change all deserts into life, means that we today live with God, in a relationship of love.

And it means we today speak against evil – evil in society as well - because of our hope for the change that Jesus Christ will bring one day.

In the midst of our present darkness, God speaks to us. He speaks and tells us to repent: to live for him and to be a witness of the good world that is coming.

And in the midst of the desert of your heart, and the desert around us... he today comes to you as well, to feed you with community with Jesus Christ. He is the salvation of God.

So that we continue on, bravely, with faith in God, and with a heart that tries to forgive, and that tries to show love for each other and also for all people in our lands even if they are not our friends.

Amen