

Sermon December 8,2024

Luke 3:1-6

In 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 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. He went into all the region around the Jordan, 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;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." '

Fire and Soap

Every year, as the shadows fall and the days get shorter, we gather here and light our candles and... we wait. We wait and we listen to the ancient prophecies: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low..." We wait, we listen and we hope that God's promises of peace and justice will be fulfilled in our lifetimes. And, every year we gather here and do it all over again.

Today, God's sacred promises seem no closer to being fulfilled than ever before... sometimes we feel like we're even farther away. It has been a long time since angels sang songs of peace over Bethlehem or greeted Mary at the empty tomb in Jerusalem. It gets harder and harder to have faith in a world filled with so much tragedy and grief... where bullets rain down in

school buildings, 50% of our country fundamentally distrusts the other half, and war rages on the same towns and villages where Jesus ministered.

And too many think the idea of God is no longer relevant or real. It sometimes feels as if our relationship with God is broken.

The prophet Malachi understood the tragedy of a broken relationship with God. He saw it in his own time and within his own congregation. After years of exile, the people were finally allowed to come home, but they forgot the covenantal promises given to them by God. The new governor, Nehemiah, promised to reform Israel, to help the poor and teach the people how to be faithful to God. The Temple was rebuilt, the Sabbath was set aside as holy, and the people listened to the promises. And they believed that God's promises would soon be fulfilled.

As the years went by, the people lost hope. Where was the wonderful future promised by the prophets? God hadn't returned to the temple in glory. The promised King had not come. The people's trust in God's covenantal love wavered.

They stopped listening.

Malachi understands their frustration but worries that the people are slipping back into the same behaviors that separated them from God in the first place, instead of bringing them closer to the One who Saves them all.

Listen, he said. The day is coming. God will send One to you who will purify you like refiner's fire and cleanse you like fuller's soap.

Refiner's fire doesn't burn indiscriminately like a forest fire – It burns away what is wrong and purifies what is left. And fuller's soap? That is soap used in antiquity to clean and whiten clothes. In other words, this Promised One will cleanse you and remove the layers of dirt and filth that cover you.

The One who comes will not judge or punish you, but saves you... to prepare you for the coming of God's Holy Presence.

Hundreds of years later, John the Baptist emerges out of the wilderness – a messenger who comes to us like fire and soap.

He proclaims that the One the people waited for has already arrived. John baptizes the people with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Purified and cleansed, he sends them back to their homes and their work, to prepare for the Mighty One who is coming, one who will baptize those who had received John's baptism with a new baptism of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus, the way we view God changes forever. In Jesus, we discover a new way to be in relationship with God. Jesus goes in the desert in the beginning of his ministry, where he is baptized by John, but Jesus doesn't stay there. He doesn't remove himself from the people he's trying to reach...no, he goes into the villages and towns where the people are and invites them to follow him.

Jesus meets us where we are.

Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey, Jesus welcomes you right here, right now. Over and over again

And the invitation continues today. So, what has to change before you meet Jesus?

Nothing.

Jesus breaks bread with all kinds of people, including people that others thought were too far gone. Jesus meets us exactly where we are, and there's no need to try to get it all together and make sure that you're "getting it right" before you greet him.

When we are welcomed and affirmed, we can choose to journey with Jesus, to follow him wherever he leads. It's not always easy, but life is far more joyful, peaceful, and abundant with Jesus by our side than when we travel alone. Nothing has to change for us to meet Jesus... for us to start experiencing God's grace. But, as we connect to that grace, everything changes in us: our relationships, our priorities, our world.

When we decide to walk with Jesus, we discover that we are cleansed once again, so we can continue to participate in God's mission in the world. To repair the broken relationships with God and neighbor everywhere we go.

No matter how bad the news is around us, cruelty and tragedy never get the final word. God's grace always has the final word. Like John and Malachi before him, Jesus of Nazareth shows us what God's redemption of the world looks like. Jesus showed us just how much he was willing to do for us. In the face of human hatred and destructiveness, he showed forgiveness even in death. God raised Jesus to life and even now Jesus is at work among us. The God who created and loves the world showed just how powerful God's redemptive love is.

Beloved! We are the People of God. We are the Body of Christ. We are the ones sent out to continue God's redemptive work.

Thanks be to God!