

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday Dec. 16, 2018 Advent 3C
Text: Luke 3;1-6
Theme: Preparing for God's Love
The Rev. Christopher McLaren

This is the beginning of the story of the wild man Johnny B. A wilderness prophet that has a message; so offensive it's attractive, so true the authorities despise him, so honest that people flock to his desert baptismal station. Wading into the muddy Jordan, those who are bound are freed, those who cannot escape their past find a new future, those who have made a career out of wounding and exploiting others change their ways. It's a challenging mission, this mission of Jesus' cousin, who speaks the raw truth, thumbs his nose at the establishment and asks respectable people to do embarrassing things all in the service of the living God. Johnny B. has received the Word of the Lord out in the desert and it is both a blessing and a scandal.

The opening verses of John's story are heady and historical, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of the Lord came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." (Luke 3:3)

This passage precisely dates the ministry of John the Baptizer in a proper kind of historical who's who of Palestine. It does it all: names the ruling parties, Roman overlords, Jewish rulers, and Temple authorities. All is in good hierarchical order, perfect gospel protocol.

But there is something amiss here. The Word of the Lord has bypassed the halls of power and instead gone out into the wilderness. Instead of this word coming from the political or religious elites who are supposed to be the mediators of divine power, the Word of the Lord finds a priest's son, who is unkept, raw and earthy, who is open to the Spirit and open to the fresh air of God's good news. He is a prophet like few have seen and he is not afraid to speak truth to power, to call people to repentance, to demand change from the fickle population that calls the Jordan River valley home. This prophet offers his message from the desert, a place of purification, of inner scrutiny and simplicity where one's weaknesses are laid bare. Far from the halls of power, Johnny B brings a new word to God's people. He cries out in the wilderness, "Repent," "Turn," "Prepare the way of the Lord," "Get ready to be changed."

What in the world is Johnny B. offering out there in the wilderness? Are you willing to make the journey with me to find out? It is not a safe journey, but it is worth it.

John is baptizing people. He's dunking them, immersing them, drowning them in the muddy waters of the Jordan. It's a powerful symbolic act done in public for all to see. It's a ritual meant to kick start an inner process of change and transformation. It's a liminal moment meant to move people past their failures and fears and into a new world of trust and faith in the living God. You know what baptism is: It's a holy bath for God's sake a washing of dirt off the body that mirrors the washing of sin away from the heart of the person. It's an outward sign that something beautiful is happening inside the soul of the person, a freshness, a new start, a beginning of life with the love of God at the center of the person.

Johnny B. names this a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." But what is it all about? The word "Repentance" is a translation of a Greek word "metanoia." Now I've heard this Greek word over and over again, but I never knew that it literally means "to go beyond the mind." When we are able to go beyond the mind then we become open to the forgiveness of our sins. I'd never heard this way of talking about John the Baptist's message. I thought repentance meant to turn around, go a different direction and it certainly does. But there is more to it. It means that the mind, your mind and my mind have a way of trying to hold us back, telling us that: we are worthless, we are failures, we are really losers, we are not worthy of God's love, we are not worthy of forgiveness, we don't matter, we are lost causes. To use the biblical term, we are sinners, we've missed it, we're off target.

Johnny B. is inviting us to enter into a place where we can let go of or go beyond anything that holds us back from embracing and accepting the beautiful love of God into our lives. Johnny B. sees himself as a kind of spiritual construction worker, building a highway for the arrival of God. Whatever is an obstacle, whatever stands in the way must be removed. If the road is winding it needs to be straightened. If it is rough it can be smoothed. If a mountain is in the way it can be flattened. If a valley slows the travel it can be lifted up to be level. The love of God is so important that the way must be cleared, whatever is needed to ease the arrival of God's love in the person of Jesus will be done. Why? So that nothing is in the way of us taking God's wild love into our thirsty souls, our hungry hearts, our messed-up lives.

Spiritual growth always entails both understanding and action. The spiritual life is not just about thinking differently it's also about behaving differently. These two are always in dynamic relationship. The people seeking Johnny B. want to know what to do. Johnny B. gives them an action plan: If you have two coats give one away, if you have more food than you need share it, if you collect taxes don't be a crook, if you are soldier quit bullying people for profit. It's straightforward and sage advice from a spiritual teacher and it serves to cause people to think.

As one commentator put it: The spiritual teacher knows any outer action will inevitably lead to the discovery of inner reluctances and obstacles. John the Baptist is about removing obstacles. The first step toward removing obstacles is discovering them. There is no better way to uncover inner blocks than trying to do something that entails a change

in the way we have previously worked. What seems like simple advice from the desert prophet becomes a journey of self-discovery.

Johnny B. wants us to discover the place in our lives where we are stuck spiritually so he tells us to act. Want to know God, try to be generous, wildly generous just like God and you'll find a tender place in your own life. What to be like Jesus, decide to be compassionate, focus on it, try to live it, read about it, and evaluate your progress. You will discover the heart of God and your own heart will begin to expand and grow tender like God's own heart.

What holds us back from really knowing the love of God in our lives? It's an important question and one that many of us struggle with. We wonder if we've ever really felt loved by God. Some of our past makes us feel like we are not worthy of God's love, we're not good enough and will never be. We've screwed up and messed up everything. We've been so hurt and hurt others so much that we are not a fit vessel to have the love of God poured into us. This is without a doubt the primary spiritual struggle of our lives. We want to know God's love but we're not sure that we deserve to. This is not the way of Jesus but it is often the way we've been taught and trained.

Our minds are powerful things. They can do amazing things but they can also hold us back. Our minds can cling to the past, to our shame, our failures, our ugliness. Speaking with my physician this past week he told me that our brains are hard-wired to remember negative or painful experiences and to pay more attention to them by a factor of at least four. We are four times more likely to focus on the dangerous and the negative. This is a survival instinct lest we mistake that orange or yellow color behind the bush as leaves or sunlight instead of a tiger. Sometimes it seems like the wrongs done to us are available to our memory so much more easily than the good things. We are so good at reminding ourselves of our own woundedness and of the wounding that we have done, that it can seem like that is the truth about us. We want to be beautiful people inside but our mind has a dastardly way of reminding us of our ugliness of clinging to the negative.

But this is not the only truth about us, is it? We are so much more than the wounds we have received or the ones we have delivered to others. We are not just the negative experiences our minds keep playing over and over for us, to our shame. There is something more and Johnny B. is holding it out to us, there is a new start a new way. It is possible to move beyond seeing ourselves as inadequate or unworthy of God's love. Johnny B. says that the Spirit is at work making a highway so that God can get to each one of us. The prophet of God says that God wants to do a good thing in each of us and that it is possible for each of us to know the love of God at a depth in our lives.

To repent is to move beyond the mind's negative trap, and once you become aware of the powerful tendency of the mind to hold onto sin, to cling to the negative then you are already moving beyond it into something new. You are more than the old tapes your mind is happy to keep playing for you. You are a forgiven person in the light and love of God. And this is the next thing, the crucial insight that leads to knowing God's love.

Christian faith at its most basic is about the unconditional love and forgiveness of God for each person. It is about the wild truth that you matter, that you are indeed loved by the wildest being in existence. You matter to the maker of heaven and earth. God is ultimate reality, and if God were to hold onto your sin or your guilt then it would be permanently present no one could get rid of it. But if God has let go of sin, of your failures, if God has forgiven you, then who is holding on to the mess? This insight clears the way for us to forgive ourselves, to let ourselves embrace the deep, deep love of God that we so desire. God is not holding onto your failures and woundedness, you are. Repentance is the moment you decide that you no longer have to hold on to all that holds you back from love.

I think that the account of Jesus' symbolic baptism in Luke gives us a clue to what the Baptizer is all about. In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus comes out of the water, he prays. In prayer, the sky opens up, the Spirit of God as a dove descends, and a voice resounds from the heavens affirming, "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased (Luke 3:22)." This is the point of baptism for the forgiveness of sins, of going beyond the mind. It readies us to hear the transcendent word of love. If we can go beyond our mind, beyond the tapes that play in our heads that tell us we are worthless, to let go of our sins and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The highway Johnny B. is building in his baptism is ultimately a path to let God get close to us, to welcome the love of God into our lives in the person of Jesus, the life-giver, healer and lover of souls.

Before we can hear the beautiful words of God that Jesus heard, "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased," we will have to undergo something of John's baptism for the repentance of sin.

We can't exactly go out to the muddy Jordan River to enact this numinous ritual of cleansing, but we can become open, yield to the offer of God's love in our lives. We can surrender our unworthiness and say yes to God's acceptance of us. As you come to the Eucharistic table to eat and be nourished, can you see it as an opening to receiving God's amazing love into the center of your life, can it be a new start to knowing that you matter to God. Making your way to the table, can you allow it to be a moment of clearing obstacles that stand between you and relationship with the loving God, can you dare to go beyond the mind, to let yourself forget your own woundedness that holds you back and say yes to God's approach? As you approach the altar of God, let it be a moment of surrender, of letting go of all that holds you back from know that you are God's beloved. Perhaps these words by George Herbert will be of help as you approach this sacred meal with Johnny B. invitation to repent buzzing in the air.

*Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,*

*Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.*

*A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.*

Source: *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Poets* (W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1978)