

A Sermon for Advent 2, Year C
Luke 3:1–6 — December 10, 2006
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On the Necessity for Change.

One day, nearly 2000 years ago, a man we now call John the Baptist appeared on the scene in southern Palestine. And part of his message, which we heard in today's gospel reading, is this: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." And what John hoped to see take place (again I'm quoting from today's gospel) was for all people to "see the salvation of God."

John was quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who lived about seven hundred years before the time of John. And what Isaiah was telling the Jews, who were living in exile in Babylon, was that God was about lead them in a new exodus back to their promised land. The Persian Empire was on the move, and they would eventually conquer the Babylonians—who had themselves conquered the Jews, some seventy or eighty years earlier, and carried them off into exile—and Cyrus, the king of Persia, was going to allow the Jews to return to their homeland.

But seven hundred years later, when John the Baptist was proclaiming these same words, he was speaking to Jews who were still living in Israel, but who were under the oppressive domination of the Roman empire. (Same essential story, different locale.) And by using Isaiah's words, which would have been familiar to the Jews of his day, John was proclaiming that yet another exodus was about to take place. It would not be a physical exodus, taking them from one place to another, but rather a political exodus, taking them out from under the oppressive Roman rule, and placing them under the ultimate rule of God, "whose service is perfect freedom" ("A Collect for Peace," *Book of Common Prayer*, page 57). But in order for this political change to take place, the people needed to undergo a personal and spiritual change. In other words—and I really think this is what John had in mind—before God could rule in their land, he must rule in their hearts.

If you hadn't already guessed it, John the Baptist was a prophet like Isaiah. And like most prophets who proclaim the need for change, his message received mixed reviews. Certainly, there were people who heard a message of hope and expectation in John's words, and were inspired to work for the changes he called for. But there were also a lot of people who didn't warm to John's message. For example, King Herod was so troubled by John's words, he eventually had John put to death.

And history has shown us, time and time again, that prophets aren't always welcomed, even in our own day. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I believe, was a modern-day prophet. His ministry was preaching hope to people who were the victims of racism and segregation. But he didn't just preach to the victims, encouraging them and guiding them. He also preached to the perpetrators of racism and segregation, challenging them to change their ways. And some people were troubled by his message and, like John the Baptist, Dr. King himself was eventually murdered.

Last week, *The Iraq Study Group Report* was published. I downloaded the report, but only had time to read the executive summary. I found it to be both persuasive and compelling. But I was really most amazed at how quickly people chose up sides; either to support the report and its authors, or to denounce them. For myself, I am honestly tempted to believe that the men and women who produced that *Report* are playing a prophetic role in their comments and suggestions about America's role in the Middle East. But whether you support it or not, it still remains an uncomfortable call for radical change.

But anyone whose the least bit familiar with the history of prophets and prophecy, knows that prophets don't generally win popularity contests. Because they see the blemishes we prefer to hide or ignore, and hold them up for all to see. And their message is always the same: this has got to change. And being "only human," and so often subject to the laws of inertia, we resist, even when that change might change everything about us for the better.

One day, the story goes, two caterpillars were crawling along the grass. All of a sudden, a butterfly flew low over them. As they looked up, one caterpillar looked to the other and said, "You couldn't get me up in one of those things for a million dollars!"

So, prophets are important for us, because they can help to identify where we've missed the mark. But they can help us get us back on track. And it doesn't matter whether we're talking about social justice issues, or spiritual issues, or even military campaigns. And when that prophetic word has been issued, it is up to us to decide what we are going to do. And what John the Baptist was suggesting, was that our social and political problems might have their genesis in our own personal and spiritual deficits. And that one of the ways to begin putting our political and social houses back into order, is to get our spiritual house back into order. In other words, getting right with God just might be the first step in getting right with our neighbor. And that probably means change. So if the Season of Advent asks any question of us it's this: Where, in our lives, is changed needed?

And change is something we're familiar with in the church. Even though the Old Testament laws required "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," Jesus called us to turn the other cheek. When the Catholic Church thought the *status quo* was good enough, Protestant reformers like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were calling for radical changes. Even our beloved Book of Common Prayer, the product of Thomas Cranmer's beautiful prose, the English Reformation, and Elizabeth I's *via media* compromises, has itself been through six or seven revisions. I'm sure there are a few of you old enough to remember the 1928 Prayer Book, and all of the hullabaloo that surrounded the efforts to change it in the 1970s. And even here at St. Luke's, we change the liturgy ever so slightly with every new season, simply to keep our worship fresh, and to keep us mindful of the prayers we're offering to God. And in a couple of weeks, we're going to try yet another change in our corporate worship: this year, our two Christmas eve services will be at 5:00 PM and 8:00 PM, rather than the traditional seven and eleven. We have what I think are very good reasons for doing this: hopefully the earlier service will better accommodate families with children, and the later service will allow people to enjoy

the grandest of holiday worship services and still get home at a decent hour. But only time will tell if this latest change is well-received, and your rector is still employed on New Year's Eve. We'll see.

As Christians we need to be about one thing, and the prophet Micah said it best when he wrote: "God has shown you what he values most. And what God values most, is that we seek justice for all people, that we have a steadfast love for all people, and that we listen to and walk with the Lord." (Micah 6:8) And if there is anything that is preventing us from doing these things, then we need to figure out with it is, and change it.

A man once wrote: "When we tell ourselves 'I can never change,' or 'That will never happen,' we presume too much and believe too little. In Jesus Christ, God renders all of our final conclusions premature, and all of our talk of determinism as simply bad faith. In Christ, God opens closed doors, brings resurrection, reveals possibilities, reclaims the lost, liberates the cursed and possessed, and changes the unchangeable."

In this season of Advent, when we prepare ourselves to greet God once more into our lives, let us remember the words, of John the Baptist: *Prepare the way of the Lord*. Let us remember those words that not only challenge us, but which also offer us a new hope: That, one day, we can all see "the salvation of God."