

Don't you just love John the Baptist. I do... And we'll be hearing more about him in January... Here's a guy out in the middle of nowhere... Looking every bit, the part of a wild man, dressed up like Elijah... He is single-mindedly on a mission, and it's not all about him!

Luke sets this story up masterfully, lots of details... we hear about all the important people of the time. We hear about the emperor, the governor, we hear about three different rulers from three different regions, we hear about the high priests, and then finally we hear that the word of God came to John, Mr. nobody, out in the middle nowhere.

This is a commentary. The word of God did not go to all the important people who were in positions of power, and who could make things happen... The Word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. Think about that for a second.

As God so often does, he enters in vulnerability, in lowly circumstances, in order to enfranchise everyone. He does not start at the top and work down. God starts on the bottom and works up. Do you see the difference?

Luke then follows with a prophecy from Isaiah, "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..."

This speaks of a great leveling, or evening out... Perhaps a time when the poor and powerless are raised up, and emperors and governors and rulers and high priests, are made low. In other words, a transformation of our typical cultural divisions... No more distinctions... And as Isaiah finishes, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

And that is good news for all people, those on the bottom as well as those on the top. Imagine if the "winners and loser's" distinction is transformed into winners and winners, well, wouldn't that mean everyone is on the top? Just sayin...

What I'd like to reflect with this morning is John's proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. On this second Sunday of Advent, when we are looking to Jesus, and expectantly hoping to experience him in sharper focus... One of the questions I want to wrestle

with concerns forgiveness. What is this forgiveness that John the Baptist prepares, and what is this forgiveness that Jesus brings?

Forgiveness is a big subject. All of us struggle with sin in different ways and all of us are in need of forgiveness. John announces a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. In other words, if you confess and repent of your sin, then God will forgive you. This way of accessing God's forgiveness was completely different than what was practiced in Jesus time.

You see, the religious professionals believed in the Torah. And according to the book of Leviticus, forgiveness or atonement comes through sacrifice—specifically the sacrifice of animals.

Leviticus chapter one is very detailed, if the animal was a turtle dove or a pigeon, the priest would wring off the poor bird's head, sprinkle its blood, tear it apart and burn it on the altar. That would create a pleasing odor to the Lord and your sins would be forgiven. I know that sounds shocking to us these days, but that's what the bible says and that's what the religious people were practicing.

So, now, when John the Baptist comes on the scene and proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, it is completely different! Rather than sacrificing an animal, all you needed to do was confess your sin and repent. This was a fundamental change in how a person accessed God's forgiveness.

So, you can see why the religious professionals had John the Baptist on their radar screen, he was teaching heresy as far as they were concerned. And to be specific, he was challenging the laws that had come down from God directly, through Moses, so this was not a matter to be taken lightly.

John acknowledges, he baptized with water, and that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Baptismal language is fundamentally transformational. The word, "baptism" comes from Hebrew washing rituals. When I wash the dishes, they are baptized, they are transformed from being unclean, to being clean...

So a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, is nothing other than accessing God's forgiveness through the washing that comes through confession and repentance... In other words, taking a deep hard look at your life, and changing your ways... And by doing that God forgives you...

Confessing and repenting is all about looking at yourself through the eyes of God. In a way, looking at yourself in a mirror. And when we have the capacity to do that, change happens, transformation happens.

And this is real and authentic change, not some intellectual game... You see this is change that is created in your heart, this is not superficial, this is soul searching, truth-telling change, another word for it is sanctification.

John's proclamation of accessing God's forgiveness is efficacious, it is real and authentic... But notice it is still conditional. **If** you confess and repent, **then** your sins will be forgiven. John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist opens an access to God's forgiveness that was truly revolutionary at the time, and now when Jesus comes on the scene, he will open an access to God's forgiveness that is completely free of any conditions or barriers.

Through Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit your sins are completely and unconditionally forgiven, as we remind ourselves every Sunday morning. God always takes the first step... Another word for this is Grace... upon grace... upon grace...

You see, if it's up to us to take the first step, we are often too fearful to take it... Fearing God's wrath and judgment... When God takes the first step toward us and demonstrates that love and forgiveness, we can open our hearts. God doesn't love us if we confess our sin; God loves us so that we can confess our sin. Do you see the difference? Totally unconditional forgiveness...

Quick story... When I was doing my chaplaincy training at Abbot in Minneapolis, I was asked to talk with a young gal. She was probably in her late twenties; long hair that didn't look like it had been combed in a long time, dirty glasses that slide down on her nose...

We made small talk for a long while. She asked me lots of questions. I had the sense she was wondering if she could trust me.

After a couple meetings she started opening up; she talked about her father; how he had physically and sexually abused her. It was so heart breaking to hear how her life had been ruined.

I told her I just couldn't imagine the pain and suffering she endured. She also told me about the therapy and support groups. With the help of professionals, she was really trying hard, doing everything she could to make a different life. I gave her so much credit...

Eventually the conversation started to be about religion. I had the feeling she was working up to something. She spoke quite openly about God. When all the abuse started, she explained that she talked often with God, she felt He was the only person who knew her suffering. Eventually as the abuse continued and became worse, she stated to blame God for all the horrific things she endured.

Then she asked, about that one unforgivable sin-- blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. She knew about that verse, she interpreted it to mean being angry at God, and she was scared. She confessed that she had called God a bad name, in fact many times. Then she looked up at me and asked, "Am I going to hell?"

Think about this for a second. Imagine being there with her, how would you respond? What would Jesus do? What would be the life-giving thing to say? I claimed that nothing was impossible for God, and that the God I believed in forgives all things, unconditionally-- even when we are angry at Him.

We spent some quiet time together. I offered to pray, and during the prayer she started weeping and crying, she dared to imagine God's love and forgiveness. And from the depth of my heart I could sense that she was experiencing forgiveness.

For years she was too scared to confess her disbelief in forgiveness, fearing God would never forgive... And when she let God take the first step, even before she dared to confess or repent,

she experienced God's forgiveness. It was the beginning of a whole new relationship for her with God.

You see the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, is simply not receiving the forgiveness. In other words, you don't receive what you think you don't deserve. And God overcomes that by always taking the first step...

It was a powerful experience for me to see forgiveness in action. Believe me, there is truth in forgiveness, it's the way of the kingdom of God. And again, this is not hocus-pocus religion, this is real and genuine!

The good news this morning is that God is always there with open arms offering forgiveness. And truly, nothing is impossible for God.

Unconditional forgiveness is the only power that can transform lives. And as Luther says, where there is forgiveness, there is life.

This is the second Sunday in Advent... John the Baptist is preparing the way for Jesus...

Let's hear the stories again... Let's sing the songs... Let's tend to our Hopes... Let's watch and wait... Let's proclaim the entire forgiveness of all our sins...

Because, Jesus continues to come... Amen