

## LUKE 3:1-18

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 Iturea and Tracnonitis and Lysanias rulers 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 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.*

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And what should we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah. John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he

will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

## **REPAIR**

### **Luke 31-18**

How many of you did your homework and looked up the word, “Repair”? If you did, the sermon title will make sense to you. If not, you are then wondering what in the heck it means. It is actually an ancient verb which declined in usage over the centuries to the point that very few people—including myself—had even heard of it. Nevertheless, it is a word that is poised to make a return to our vocabularies.

To understand its meaning, let’s begin by having a little English lesson and breaking it down. Its root is “Pair”—P-A-I R—which is a derivative of a French word which is defined as hope, peace and harmony. “Pair” can be preceded by one of two prefixes—D-E-S, (despair) or R-E-S, (repair). Since D-E literally means “deletion”, the word “des-pair” is defined as the loss of hope, peace and harmony. On the other hand, R-E is a prefix for “again”, so Repair means the opposite—a return to that state of being which was lost.

It occurs to me that we are caught right now between Despair and Repair. A sizable majority of Americans believe that our country is headed in the wrong direction. Inflation is skyrocketing; corruption in our government and in our sports federations seem to be the rule rather than the exception; our must-have purchases are backed up at ports; and the divisions among us grow wider and the rhetoric more hateful. So, if you want a reason to “despair” right now, you do not have to search very far. But how we can “Repair” is the question.

All of which makes our scripture lesson extremely relevant to our current times. For it provides us with a mirror image of our own era which is overlaid by the same selfishness, greed, corruption and racism which plagued society two thousand years ago. You can infer this from

John's proscriptions to those who were seeking to repent for their sins. What does repentance look like? Saying, "Sorry" is not good enough. No, for *Whoever has two coats, give one away*. Repentance involves sharing!

Unfortunately, because of our obsession with consumerism, our focus is heavily tilted toward "more for me and crumbs for you." When one percent of the population control ninety percent of the wealth, you have a world where the rich and powerful grow even more rich and more powerful and the impoverished and less fortunate are cast further and further to the sidelines.

And then speaking to tax collectors, John says, *Collect no more than what is prescribed to you*. They were notorious for placing their finger on the scale, taking bribes and flat out embezzling from common citizens and business people alike. And no one could stop them.

Ironically, in our country the finger on the scale does not belong to the tax collectors, but to those avoiding taxes with laws favoring cheaters who don't want to pay their fair share. And because wealthy individuals and corporations can open wide purse strings to lobby law makers to create loopholes and tax shelters to shield them from forking it over, it is paramount to a reverse finger on the scale. Repentance also requires fairness.

And John's message is essentially the same to soldiers: *Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages*. This is a proscription to those in law enforcement and we have had plenty of documented problems with racial profiling and unwarranted violence against people of color. It is just one more example of the unfairness and inequality that runs rampant through our society. Repentance also requires an end to racist behaviors.

John was a fierce character. He emerged from the desert eating locusts and wild honey and wearing a camel's hair coat and a leather belt. Beyond his wild man appearance, he fit the mold of the prophets in his indictment of sin and the looming consequences. Speaking of the coming Messiah, he warns, *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and*

*to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.* And he apparently had a successful ministry which is witnessed by the fact that Herod had him beheaded. A price was paid for fomenting unrest by calling out the people for their sins which implicated government officials as well. It's called insurrection. And three years later, Herod nailed Jesus on the same charge.

Many actually regarded John as the Messiah, but John distanced himself from that notion. It is understood that Jesus and John knew each other and were perhaps even cousins. But there was no competition for John clearly recognized that Jesus was the One: *I baptize you with water, but One who is more powerful than I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.* That was John's good news and therein lies the promise of Respair. So, in spite of the harshness of his condemnation of their behavior, his message was underlaid by joy, hope and anticipation—the central message of our Advent season.

John made it clear, though, that his followers had a sacred obligation to *Bear the fruits worthy of repentance...for every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* The *fruits worthy of repentance* are not only our individual responsibility, but our corporate obligation as well. We are called to be Kingdom builders which we cannot do by ourselves. Collectively, we must break down and rebuild the structures of our society which have given rise to systemic poverty and racism. You cannot have Respair as long as large segments of our world live without hope of equality and freedom from discrimination. God's Kingdom is inclusive, favoring no one and at the same time favoring everyone.

Wherever we build, God is there. And everything we build must have room for all. *Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill 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.* And there it is: the restoration of hope, peace and harmony. So let us not Des-pair. Let us Res-pair and rejoice in the coming of the Messiah. For all memories of the past will be healed and all the pent-up energies of our unexpressed desires will flow out from us in joyful expression

when our communion with nature and with the Spirit become complete.

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