

Today's story is about Jesus beginning His ministry. God could have had a lightning splash and all kinds of loud fanfare or mass media attention to announce the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But interestingly, God chose this scruffy-looking person named "John the Baptist," who was a Prophet, to announce Jesus' coming. Today's story begins and ends with John the Baptist, whom God utilized to begin Jesus' ministry.

In our passage today, we see the introduction of John the Baptist, the forerunner to Christ. He came to prepare the way for the Lord and make straight paths for him (Matthew 3:3b). Whatever he said and did was for this purpose—to prepare the way for the Lord. This preparatory ministry of John the Baptist is mentioned in all four gospels—Matthew (Matthew 3), Mark (Mark 1), Luke (Luke 3), and John (John 1)—in the Bible. It was predicted long before John the Baptist was even born. His forerunning was integral to what Jesus had come to do. John got the people thinking about their lives and their relationship with God as a way to prepare them for the Lord.

The idea of "being prepared" seems to surface from time to time in our daily lives. When a health or financial crisis comes our way, we wonder if we have enough insurance and resources to carry us. We stop and ask ourselves, "Am I prepared?" We prepare for a vacation, a trip, or a new job. We discover the need to be prepared in so many places in our lives as we make plans for careers, marriage, and retirement.

Some of us take the idea of preparedness very seriously, while others seem to get along fine with less preparation. I take the idea of preparedness very seriously in all aspects of my life, especially regarding my relationship with God. Last week, we had a Christmas story in July. "We expect Jesus to be born not only on Christmas Day in December, but every day," we said. For the coming of Jesus on Christmas Day, we start our preparation on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. We call this time of preparation "Advent." Then, the question for us now is: "How do we prepare ourselves to receive Jesus each and every day?" How did you prepare to meet Jesus today in this worship hour?

Being prepared is essential whether one is walking 100 miles in a week or training for the Ironman in October here in Kona, Hawaii, or cooking for family and friends in the kitchen. John the Baptist dedicated his life to preparing himself and others for the Lord. He prepared people for the Lord with the message of repentance, expressed in water baptism and bearing active fruit in one's life.

We don't hear a lot of messages about repentance these days. We hear that God loves us, which is true. Yes, God is love. God has steadfast, unselfish concern for our welfare. There is no question about that, right? If any of you who are hearing this message have any doubt about God's love for you, please contact me. I am more than happy to assist you to see how much God loves you. Yes, God is love, and God loves us all unconditionally. In His love through Jesus Christ, God makes forgiveness available for us to restore our relationship with God. God initiates this loving relationship with us.

To make this relationship happens, we need to respond to it. Often, we miss our role in this relationship with God. God invites us all to be in this loving relationship. Jesus tells us, in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22:1-14, that we all are loved and welcomed to God's house. But only those who wear the proper garments in this parable actually entered into the presence of the Host. Only those who are clothed in Christ through repentance taste the sweetness of the loving fellowship with God. God expects us to follow Him to be in this relationship with God. If we're heading down the wrong path in life's journey on earth, then we should turn around. "Repent" is the word. "Repent" is the word John the Baptist used to prepare people for the Lord. "Repent" is the word used to begin Jesus' ministry.

In the New Testament, repentance is tied to the idea of going in a new direction. The Greek word translated as "repentance" in English, "fakatomalá" in Tongan, "salamo" in Samoan, "회개 (hoe-gae)" in Korean, and "sorry" in the preschool language is *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*), which means "to change one's mind." Repentance is changing one's mind by turning away from the attitudes and behaviors that separate us from God, which John the Baptist called "sin." S-I-N!

Sometimes people talk about a "moment of repentance"—the specific moment when they realize their need for God's forgiveness for the first time. In The United Methodist Church, it is called a "justifying grace" moment. It is an "A-ha" moment that we realize that we are loved by God, but we are not worthy of His love because of SIN. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our

own way and been separated from God (Isaiah 53:6). Not once. Not twice, but every day. To bring us back to God, God has sent His only begotten Son, Jesus, and laid on Him the iniquity of us all through His ministry.

All the stories in the Bible are about how God brings God's people back to God since the first two humans, Adam and Eve, went against God and introduced sin into humanity. In the New Testament, this story begins through the voice of John the Baptist in the wilderness—"Repent and prepare the way for the Lord!" Through **his message of repentance, John the Baptist** prepared himself and others for Jesus to begin His ministry of reconciliation.

We participate in Jesus' ministry of reconciliation with the word of repentance by confessing our sins. If we are serious about this word of repentance in our relationship with God, we know that we have to do something about it. The first act of repentance John the Baptist preached about is receiving the baptism of repentance (Luke 3:3). By participating in this baptism of repentance, we are making a public declaration that we are going in a new direction as a way to prepare ourselves for the Lord.

This simple yet powerful act of repentance should not end there if we take the relationship with God seriously. We, the followers of Jesus Christ, practice the act of repentance daily as we learn to become more like Jesus. It is often called a "spiritual discipline" or "sanctifying grace" in The United Methodist Church. It is the daily practice of "Let go and let God." Let us be part of John the Baptist's message of repentance by letting go of ourselves and letting God in our lives today. Amen.