**Reading A: Luke 3:1-6**

A few summers ago my family attending a wedding near the place where Washington crossed the Delaware river. That was a significant place in America’s history. We were then able to visit Valley Forge, where Washington’s army stayed for the winter of 1777-1778, and where the army was forged into the fighting unit that could defeat the British. While I was there with my family, something strange happened. There was a funny man. He was kind of a dirty man, dressed in an outfit like George Washington would have worn. He was kind of ranting and raving down by the river and a large crowd of people was standing, listening to him. As we got closer to him, he looked directly at me, and shouted out, “who do you think you are, you dirty rattlesnake? Yes, you, I’m talking to you.” I was stunned. Who did he think he was talking to. But he kept talking. “When Washington and his men crossed this river, they were united. They looked across that bank and knew the greatest army in the world was on the other side, but that didn’t stop them from getting in the boats and stopping. Because they were united Americans. And they fought, and they sacrificed, and they won this country. But now look at us. Look at you, you bunch of rattlesnakes. Americans today hate each other. We don’t sacrifice. We’re living off the sweat and blood of previous generations, and if we don’t get our act together it’s all going to come crashing down on our heads.

But I have a solution. The revival starts here. It starts in your own hearts. He then unveiled a wooden boat. He said, “This boat holds thirty people. I want you all to get it. Democrats, Republicans, white, black, immigrants, native born. And you’re going to ride that boat and say, today, we are all Americans. Today we return to our roots. Today we seek to sacrifice, to serve, to honor as George Washington did before us. Today, we start to rebuild our fallen land. Only then can we fulfill our destiny as a people.

Unfortunately, as dramatic and cool as that story was, I just made it up. My family really did go there last summer, but the rest was made up. But for a reason! Imagine how gripping such a scene would have been. Imagine the layers and layers of meaning I would have heard in the words of that man. The years of tradition. Do you think some Japanese tourist would have understood? Partially, but not fully. Well, that scene, with all its drama and historical allusion, begins to present how dramatic and historically laden the ministry of John the Baptist was. Luke begins to tell us about his ministry by nailing the year and the general time period quite specifically.

**In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,**

We see again Luke’s interest in history. This is the year AD 28 or 29 depending how you count. Tiberias Caesar was the successor of Augustus Caesar. They would have recognized this year as the 782nd year since the founding of the Roman empire. This was the year Caesar Augustus’s wife died and the Romans captures modern day Sophia, in Bulgaria.

Now I know what you’re all thinking. Herod the Great was a king, but now they have a Roman governor. What gives? Well, King Herod was a Roman tributary. After he died, the Romans divided his territory up among his sons, and some of the continued to do a pretty good job. But the one who was given Judea died early, and the Romans decided to go ahead and appoint a Roman governor rather than a king. The Herod who is mentioned here is the son of the famous Herod the Great. Finally, the situation with the high priest was confusing at this time. The Romans, for a reason lost to history, deposed the high priest Caiaphas and installed his son Annas in his place. But the Jewish people continued to recognize Caiaphas.

All this reminds us that Luke was a careful researchers and historian. He wanted Theophilus and us to be confident in the things he tells us about Jesus. And in this year, something amazing happened, like that fictional account I gave of Valley Forge:

**the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:**

**“A voice of one calling in the desert ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.**

**Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ”**

He was at the Jordan River. This was an important river in the history of Israel. One the east bank, Moses had given his farewell speck to the Israelites, and then after he died Joshua led them across the river in a miraculous crossing, and they entered the promised land for the first time. This is where it all started for them as a nation. That’s why I compared it George Washington crossing the Delaware earlier.

This was also a dry land. It was not the populated part of the country. It’s the lowest place on earth, and hard to inhabit. There isn’t much there. It’s a place you went to get away. It’s a place David had gone to hide. But John tells us, it’s a place where God wanted the people to prepare. This time they were not preparing to enter the promised land themselves. Now they were waiting for God to enter the promised land.

Jewish people would have traveled this corridor frequently. The easiest path to Jerusalem without going through Samaria took them right here. And there was John doing something strange, washing the people.

In Greek, the word baptism is simply the word for “washing.” I partly wish that we still had this practice. Instead of saying “I baptize you in the name of the Father…” I could say, “I wash you in the name of the Father…” But we have made it into a fancy church word. The Old Testament did not contain a lot of washings, but in Jesus’ day the Jews practiced many different kinds of washings every day. However, there was nothing like John’s baptism. It was a one-time washing connected to repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance is a word we need to explain. It really means “change of mind.” You change the way you think. Before, your thinking was turned away from God and toward yourself. Now, your thoughts are towards God’s word and away from your sinful desires. That means you no longer accept your sin. You hate it. You want to be rid of it. And you no longer ignore or mock the promises of God. Instead, you love them, you trust them, you rely on him for forgiveness. Repentance does not mean we are perfect. When we constantly mourn our sinful state and seek to please God. We keep asking him for forgiveness and trusting he will forgive us.

This is a basic component of the Christian faith. But it was necessary at the time. We’re going to see in our next reading that people were not really ready. That’s why John had to get them ready. To them, faith in the truth God had become a bunch of dusty old traditions mixed with famous stories and ethnic pride. John needed them to see: the true faith was not just about traditions. It was about an encounter with the living God. An encounter like that cannot leave you unmoved. And he was about to come and bring: salvation. Remember we heard during Christmas that the name Jesus means, “The Lord saves,” and what he saves us from is our sin. Both the guilt of sin and the effects of sin, most notably, death. That is what God was going to come save them from. So they needed to get serious.

Do we need to get serious? Americans do. I don’t mean about politics. I think our politics is pretty ugly, but I think that reflects deeper ugliness. We are filled with pride. Our technology has given us that mistaken idea that we are smarter than people in other generations. Yet what do we usually use this great technology for? So often its for cheap entertainment. Immoral gratifications of lust. Showing off, arguing, or desperately comparing with others on social media. We escape from our duties to love and serve others. Or to take another example, we have obliterated the most basic institution in society, the family, and we think it is evidence of progress.

We need to repent. We need to have a change in our thinking. Instead of seeking what feels best now, we need to seek what God desires. And we need to turn to him for forgiveness, which he freely and readily provides through Jesus Christ. That salvation is here. But until we have understood God’s law, that it condemns us before God, that it makes us worthy of and brings death, we cannot really understand what it is that Jesus saves us from. Yet John will have more to say on this topic, yet we turn to our Psalm to consider repentance.

**Reading B, Luke 3:7-14**

Sometimes people appreciate it when you “tell it to them like it is.” When we hear John’s message, we might be shocked that anyone would listen to him. Yet John was in some ways more popular than Jesus. He had followers decades and decades after he died. We read of followers of John far away in modern day Turkey, who had followed John but never heard of Jesus. His message was powerful because it was direct and didn’t pull any punches:

**John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”**

God needed a man with a lot of moral integrity and a lot of boldness to deliver such a message. They could not just pretend they agreed. It’s not hard to listen to people complaining about “how things are these days,” and all the things wrong with society. Anybody can do that. But to produce fruit in keeping with repentance is another thing. It’s one thing to say, “People are immoral these days,” and it’s quite another to live above the moral decay all around us. It’s one thing to say, “we need to be kind and loving,” and it’s another thing to take some of your own time and some of your own money and help someone else, or be kind to them when they’re being a jerk to you. But John calls them on it. If you’re really had a change of heart, if you are really repentant, it will show up in your life. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

But some of them thought they were good enough because they were Abraham’s ancestors. Today we often think this kind of thing. I’m good to go, because I was confirmed. Please, kids, don’t think this. Being confirmed doesn’t mean anything if you turn around and throw it all out the window. I have had more than one conversation with people who are WELS through and through. Let me look around and make sure they aren’t here. They haven’t been to church in 20 years, they had no intention of going, they hadn’t opened a Bible in who knows how long and their lives had plenty of evidence that they had forgotten at least a few of the commandments. But they really think that saying, “I’m WELS, always have been, always will be,” means something to God. If you love God so much, if you believe his promises, it will show in some of your actions. That does not mean you will be perfect. But you will produce some fruit. Ultimately, God does not tell us to put our hope in our fruit, he tells us to put our hope in Jesus. But sometimes we can kid ourselves. We can give ourselves false security. John’s warning about fruit helps us examine ourselves and make sure we aren’t putting our hope in our traditions, or in our religious ancestors, but in a living faith in the living God. A true change of mind, which is what repentance means.

But you might be wondering, what kind of fruit? What does God desire? Here is some good news for your New Year’s resolutions. We tend to make New Year’s resolutions like “I’m going to lose weight” or “I’m going to do more.” As if we don’t already have enough going on. How about the simple encouragement John gives for those who have a new way of thinking and want to serve God in their lives:

**“What should we do then?” the crowd asked.**

**John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”**

How about sharing more? God doesn’t ask you to lose weight. It’s great if you can, and maybe you’ll have more energy to serve others if you do, but that’s not so high on God’s priority list. And God doesn’t really care how many books you read, or if you can save up for that vacation or start that new hobby. What God wants to see is kindness to each other. As Luther put it, God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does. This was in an ancient village setting. People knew each other, knew each others needs, and most of their needs were food and clothing. Today, I think we mostly have enough food and clothing. People have other needs. I think today a lot of people are starving socially. They lack friends. Aging family members are so lonely in nursing homes and sometimes get neglected. In Jesus day, when there was no such think as privacy, that was not an issue, food was. Today, people need other things. But go out of your way to be kind, helpful, and generous to people. That is in your personal life and at work. I think especially if you are retired, and we have a lot of retired people, are you using your time and energy to serve, or just on yourself? The same goes for working people, but of course they have some more specific instructions:

**Tax collectors also came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?”**

**“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them.**

Tax collectors could easily rip people off. Instead, be fair and faithful. If you’re a postal worker, you know how you serve God? By being the best postal worker you can be. By being honest, helpful, faithful, these is what God wants. Not superhero good works. Just faithful service.

Lutherans call this the doctrine of vocation, which means “calling,” If you work in a restaurant, be the best worker you can. It really goes back to creation. Humans were made to work in the garden. Just taking care of the earth and doing our personal tasks is God-pleasing. Only don’t abuse our situation. Here’s another example:

**Then some soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”**

**He replied, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”**

Soldiers also did what we think of as police work. Don’t lie, and don’t complain. Don’t riot, don’t demand more, just do a good, honest job at work.

We can apply this to parents… children… students…

Why? Because repentance is a change in thinking. It is turning towards the true, living God. He is always there. He is not just our Lord in church. He is the Lord of all aspects of our lives. When we are judges, we will be judged based on our entire lives, not just what we did on Sunday. Thankfully, the blood of Christ will cover us on that day, we will be declared innocent through faith in him. But since we know his great salvation, we want to serve him by serving and loving others in every aspect of life.

I suggest, if you want a New Year’s resolution, a good one would be reading the Bible every day, but another one could simply be: be more generous, more faithful, more devoted to others and sacrificial this year. It’s not the way we usually think, but God’s kingdom turns our natural thinking upside down.

**Reading C, Luke 3: 15-20**

**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.**

**But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.**

It’s interested to me that Luke says that John “preached the good news to them.” Hey you bunch of vipers, you’re going to get thrown into the fire and burned up! And don’t give me that Abraham’s children stuff, you’re toast!” It doesn’t seem good at first glance. But it was. Because he was getting ready for Jesus, the greatest news. We talked about him a lot at Christmas, how he was God and man in one person, how he came to save.

Today’s reading I hope has clarified aspects of that salvation. He didn’t just die so we can say, “Oh, he died, that’s nice, I guess I’ll just keep living like before.” That’s not possible with truth faith. Jesus could have just died on the cross, and never told anyone about it, but hey, he died for you, right? No, it so important that we tell people, that they know? Why? Because he died to reconcile us to God. To bring us back into that loving fellowship with God we were created to be. That is the change of mind. And yes he fully accomplished our salvation and gives us the forgiveness of sins freely, with no strings attached. But that forgiveness changes the way we think.

So Jesus now baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire. Remember, the word baptizes means to wash, to clean. He is at work, purifying us. That happens in two stages. He is purifying us now. We have the work of the holy spirit now. He leads us to live more godly lives. But at the same time, our final purification will come on judgement day. Those who love him, those with faith, those whose minds have been renewed will be gathered to him. And we will be so ready for it. Hopefully, the longer we live in this sinful, mortal body, the more we long to be clothed with immortality. The more we long to be rid of this sinful flesh and receive a new, perfect, spiritual body forever. That is what Jesus promises. Fire purifies God’s people, but it also destroys those who do not repent. And so it is a warning to us all.

Some people hated John’s message. In fact, Herod was so offended that he had him imprisoned and eventually killed. Our sinful nature hates this message. Yet we realize it is ultimately good news, because it leads to Jesus’ salvation. We have several doctors and health care workers here. It’s never pleasant when the doctor tells you the bad news. But they only do it in order to try to bring you the right treatment. John the baptist’s preaching was harsh, and applying it to ourselves can be hard. But ultimately it’s good for us, because it leads us to see how badly we need salvation in Christ, and how good it is that he came and provided it for poor sinners like us.

Announcements:

* Show photos from the food sorting
* Announce Bible reading plan
* Announce details of the youth lock-in.
* Explain the men’s breakfast.