

Second Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church. Houston, TX
5 December 2021
Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptizer meets us today. He has come to help us prepare the way for the Lord. He comes to us today in the same way that he came to those at the time of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was ruler of Galilee. He comes to us today when Joe Biden is president of the United States, Greg Abbott is Governor of Texas, Lina Hidalgo is Harris County Judge, and Sylvester Turner is Mayor of Houston. He comes today during the time when Andy Doyle is Bishop Diocesan of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas and Roman D. Roldan is Rector of Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church. He comes to us in the words of the Gospel of Luke to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He comes to prepare the way for the one who makes the paths straight, who fills the valleys, who makes the mountains low, who makes the crooked ways straight, who makes the rough roads smooth, and who offers salvation to all flesh around the world.

John the Baptizer is here among us reminding us that every time the Gospel of Luke speaks of sin, it always speaks of forgiveness immediately after. There is no mention of sin that is not followed by the mention of God's mercy and God's compassion. John comes today to remind us that for centuries many men and women have tried to obtain salvation by their own merits: They have fasted, they have offered charity, they have brought sacrifices to their altars, they have deprived themselves of all comforts, they have sought the council of the wise, they have gone on thousand-mile spiritual quests... and yet, they haven't been able to solve the problem of sin. They have failed because they were looking for solutions in the wrong places.

This is the message from John the Baptizer to us today: We think we can heal ourselves; we believe we can solve the problem of evil in this world; and we think we can rationalize our sin out of existence. We have built an entire economy on the need for self-improvement. We no longer have to tolerate imperfection. We believe we can cure what afflicts the human heart. We can make ourselves happier, younger, more balanced, better people. We think self-acceptance is the solution to the problem of sin. We have designed a system of corrective measures to make ourselves feel better, and it is a rather simple system, really: When we feel guilty about our excess, we give some old clothes to the Good Will, when we feel guilty about our wastefulness, we bring some food to the food pantry, and when we feel we have offended God in some way, we come to church, or we say an "Our Father." We think that we have a solution for every bad feeling or emotion.

In this respect we are very similar to the Jewish people of John the Baptizer's day. They believed that outward righteousness was the solution to the problem of sin. If they just separated from the unrighteous they would be fine. If they just went through certain rituals every day, they would be okay. If they just washed their hands, fasted once a

week, and paid the temple tax they would be doing their part. In the meantime, their world was in chaos, they were surrounded by injustice, they had built great walls of separation between them and “the other,” they had learned to see God as an angry God that had to be appeased through daily ritual. They had forgotten that God was a Father who could be trusted because he loved them.

John the Baptizer comes to us today to remind us that we cannot save ourselves. Every time we think we are doing quite well as a culture; we are forced to see the cruelty with which some treat others in the name of religion. Every time we feel secure, we see another school shooting and another list of victims, as we saw last week in Michigan. So far in 2021, we have seen 654 mass shootings in this country, which have killed over a thousand people and have injured many thousands more. This information comes from experts who track these attacks. (<https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting?page=26>.) We see this kind of violence so often that we have become immunized, we have become numb, we have become accustomed. In the meantime, many of us believe that repentance is a matter of self-help introspection. John the Baptist reminds us today that true repentance seeks help from the outside. There is nothing inside of ourselves or inside our world that can solve the problem of evil. When it comes to forgiveness, we cannot help ourselves. Even though many of us believe, "I can do it by myself," when it comes to forgiveness this does not work. Forgiveness comes from the outside first. Acceptance comes from the outside first. Adoption comes from the outside before it is felt in the inside. There is something fundamentally wrong in our world and only God can help us. There is a darkness that advances and takes over, and we need help! We need the help that comes from the mountains. We need God the Savior who becomes man for our sake. We need Jesus of Nazareth to come and make all things new.

It is because God forgives us that we can forgive ourselves. It is because God accepts us that we can accept ourselves. It is because God adopts us as his children that we can claim to be sons and daughters of the Most High. My friends, this forgiveness, acceptance, and adoption come to us through a child whose birth in Jerusalem we will celebrate soon. He is the image of the Most High who leads us to the Most High. He is the *God with us* who leads us to God himself. He is the one who is the clearest image of God's love and God's acceptance of humanity. The forgiveness this child brings us can only be received when we acknowledge how desperately needy we are of this forgiveness. Today, John the Baptizer focuses our attention on the child who is to come, and he reminds us that there is some preparation that needs to take place before this arrival. There is some house cleaning that must be done in our hearts and lifestyles. There is a baptism of repentance that must take place.

My friends, as I prepare myself for the coming of our savior, the one thing I have to repent the most is my own arrogance. There are times when I think more highly of myself than I think of Jesus, there are times when I think I can do all things by myself, there are times when I believe I am doing quite okay by myself, thank you very much! But, today, John reminds me, and I hope he reminds you too, that it is Christ who saves

us and not ourselves. It is Christ who dies for us. It is Christ who gives us meaning and hope. It is Christ who will eliminate all imbalance and injustice in the world. It is Christ who will bring equality, who will fill all valleys and make all mountains low. It is Christ who breaks all walls of separation and who makes one body out of peoples of every race, culture, and location. We must prepare for his coming on bended knee, acknowledging that we need his love, his mercy, and his compassion.

I pray that all of you today will prepare for his coming with joy and hope. This has been a year of bloodshed and great uncertainty because of COVID-19 and all its variants. Many of us are rightly worried. To us, the very future of the world rests in the balance. But we have nothing to fear. Christ is in control of history, and he will guide us safely home. We must trust in his love and his mercy even in the midst of great suffering and instability. I invite you today to clear your hearts from all self-sufficiency, arrogance, or apathy. I invite you today to love others as he loves you. Love in the midst of pain and suffering is the most counter revolutionary behavior in which Christians can engage. Today I invite you to pray and assess your life. Prepare the way for the Lord and welcome him into your hearts. He will make all the difference in your life and, as he has made all the difference in my life!

May he continue to bless you and your families. Amen!