

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“GOOD NEWS FOR BAD TIMES”
Luke 3:7-18
DECEMBER 13, 2009
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

John the Baptist is pointing us to the coming Messiah as our source of salvation. He is calling us to repentance - - that is, to turn our own efforts to justify ourselves and change our lives. John knew that all people need help from beyond themselves. We cannot save ourselves from sin and death.

People everywhere strive for a new sense of life's meaning and purpose. We spend enormous amounts of energy and money trying to improve ourselves. We can only find genuine newness of life if we acknowledge our limitations and turn to God who is our hope for a new life.

Books such as *Whatever Happened to Sin?* by Karl Menninger and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* by Philip Rieff map the cultural shift from a moral model for understanding human need to a therapeutic model. Much that was considered sin is now seen as sickness. For many, repentance is being replaced by psychotherapy.

A staple image for cartoonists is the shabby, bearded fellow walking down a city street carrying a sign that reads, “**Repent!**” or, “**The End is Near!**” The cartoonist, of course, is creating humor and the sign-bearer is part of the joke. Serious calls to repentance are seldom taken seriously today. “**Repentance**” seems like a word from another time and place. It was a serious word to the prophet who prepared the way for the coming of the Messiah.

John the Baptist may have looked something like the cartoonist image of a prophet of doom. He lived in the wilderness, wore animal skins, and ate locusts and wild honey. His message was a stern call to repentance. He believed the people's only hope was God's forgiveness of their sins. He baptized all who repented. There was another aspect to John's preaching. He announced the

imminent arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. John baptized with water, but the one who was coming, whose sandals John was not worthy to untie, would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John was the forerunner who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus, and John understood his own role and fulfilled it. Both John and Jesus, however, understood the importance of repentance for all who turn to God.

John's preaching style fits most people's idea of the "**hell-fire and brimstone**" preacher. He pulled no punches when speaking of the judgment of God. About the Messiah, he said: "***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.***" Given John's appearance, personal habits, and preaching style, we might assume that no one would want anything to do with him. John was a loud, crude, and confrontational preacher. People don't want to listen to a religious fanatic. But in fact, John was extremely popular. People from all over went out into the wilderness to hear him. The rougher his preaching became, the more they flocked to hear him. Perhaps they were tired of the safe, familiar teachings they had heard all their lives. Maybe they were bored or disillusioned with the current religious atmosphere. Whatever the reason, they heard what John was saying as good news!

The Gospel of Luke says, "***With many other exhortations, John preached good news to the people.***" How could they possibly hear his rantings as good news? **First**, the people sensed that John was speaking the truth. As a rule, people respond positively to someone they feel is truthful. **Second**, the people must have been moved by John's courage. He did not fear to tell the truth that confronts power, the truth that is unsettling, the truth that honors God. **Third**, there was good news in John's preaching. He may have been unrelenting in his condemnation of sin and evil, but God's forgiveness was available to all who responded to the call to repentance. The true prophet's message consists of both bad news and good news. The bad news concerns the reality of our sinfulness, which we need to face. The good news is that, if we will repent of our sin, God will forgive us and grant us a new beginning.

Undoubtedly, the people also liked John because he told them plainly what they should do. After hearing his warning of imminent doom, the people asked, "***What then shall we do?***" John told them to share their clothing and food with the poor. Some tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "***What shall we do?***" Jesus said, "***Collect no more than what is owed.***" Some Roman soldiers asked, "***And***

we, what shall we do?” John said, “Rob no one, either by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

It is a dramatic example of John’s popularity that even Roman soldiers were drawn to him. John died because of his courage and candor, but he remained popular even after his death. Some people thought that Jesus might be John the Baptist returned from the dead. And Jesus praised John as one of history’s greatest servants of God.

There is something about which we need to be clear. John the Baptist was not effective for God because he was angry and offensive. We must not use him as a justification for our own tendency to be unfeeling and rude to individuals we think are in the wrong. We often hear people say something like, **“I felt like someone needed to tell her the truth.”** Someone will say, **“I had to be honest with him about what I think.”** Sometimes the most cruel thing you can do is tell someone the truth! And when the truth must be told, it should be spoken in love. John was not effective because he was abrupt, but because he was inspired by God.

When Jesus came, he preached the same message as John. **“Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.”** On the lips of Jesus, however, it seemed less abrasive. John could peel the bark right off the tree with his preaching! Jesus’ manner was more gentle and inviting. Little children sat on his lap. Sinners ate with him. Both prostitutes and Pharisees were drawn to him. He told interesting stories and moved comfortably among the people. Yet, as different as they were, both John and Jesus were inspired by God. There were so many differences between them that John finally sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah. Still, they had in common an absolute devotion to God and an unflinching courage in serving God.

As we draw nearer to Christmas, we anticipate the coming of Christ. What should we do? The answer of John the Baptist is within the reach of all of us. Repent of your sin. Share with those in need. Do your daily work honestly and well. This will honor Christ when he comes.

How often we find that our self-confidence was misplaced! It is said that lawyers who plead their own case have a fool for a client. We simply lack the objectivity to represent ourselves in court fairly and wisely. In much the same manner, people who try to save themselves may be foolhardy. We lack the wisdom and the discipline to create a new life on our own. We need help from our Creator and Redeemer if we are to find the life for which we long. And the good

news; that new life is available to you right here and right now for God is an ever-present help in time of trouble! Good news for bad times.

I invite you today to turn from your anxiety and present your needs to God. God has promised that his own peace will stand guard over your hearts and minds, helping you when your own efforts fail.