

## THE ROARING CALL TO REPENT

Luke 3: 1-9

This month we have addressed one of the most lurid and heinous sins in the Bible that included the adultery King David committed with the wife of one of his men, Uriah, and the subsequent arrangement to see that his faithful soldier was killed. The Bible has no plaster saints, no sugar-coating of any story. The reader of this account is disturbingly exposed to the sins. Then last week we learned that Psalm 51 is one of the most complete examples of a heartfelt confession that we can find; it is virtually a template for confession, so much so that the passage is almost always used as an Ash Wednesday text examining our own brokenness. Today we turn to repentance. It's the U-Turn from the direction some travel into the yawning mouth of sin. William James once wrote: "The best repentance is to get up and act for righteousness and forget that you ever had relations with sin." David certainly would have wanted that as do others in our own day. Now, we are reminded of prophet weeks earlier than Advent season, where he usually appears. He is John; the Baptizer; the firebrand; the loose cannon. Last week I saw a man standing on Dunlawton Avenue with a huge sign: "REPENT! TURN TO JESUS! But then at the bottom was written: "Vaccines will kill you!" I decided that his bottom message watered down his top one. Today we should think about the signs or events that implore us to repent from our sins, to U-turn. But from what? From sins like adultery or stealing or bearing false witness. From divisiveness; from political rancor; from overt racism; and from foul language displayed on flags and signs where everyone, including children, can see it! Let John come back to *this* nation and call for repentance! But alas, John was a man of his region and time. One commentator put it this way:

He appears to have been an itinerant preacher, who confined his work to the region around the Jordan, never crossing the hills to Jerusalem or leaving the

wilderness region entirely....Interestingly though after [describing] John in this political setting, Luke concerns himself very little with John's political interactions, focusing instead on the "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." [Mariam J Kamell in *FEASTING ON THE WORD*, Year C, Volume 4. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 49.] ]

Personal repentance, as I outlined several years ago in a seminar, is one step of many that works to restore us to God and others.

*Relationship Rescue in Religion includes:*

*Remorse or regret;*

*Repentance or returning;*

*Restitution -to square the account;*

*Reconciliation;*

*Renewal of relationships;*

*Reunion with God, and hopefully with others.*

We can each work toward that goal. But what about *corporate or communal* sins that need a U-Turn? The Medical Director for Joseph's House in Washington D.C. a community for homeless men, once wrote:

Repenting of my personal sin and separation from God is at least something I know how to do. ...But we who are affluent and comfortable let the powerful institutions of our society do most of our sinning for us.... I reap enormous benefits from the unregulated, radical, free market economic system that not only impoverishes billions of people around the world but also destroys the fragile ecology of the Earth....Most of the institutions that must be transformed—political power, large corporations, the criminal justice system, and many others benefit me too. Repentance, therefore, is the necessary first step in withdrawing my power from that with which I struggle. ["The Living Pulpit," Volume 13, No. 3, p. 22-23.]

Sometimes we just don't speak up about actions that are wrong that seem to benefit us. John's call to repentance from the wilderness of Galilee seems to be a quaint and far cry from a call to repentance for Main Street and Wall Street. What a herculean effort it must take to make good changes there! It seems that moving mountains in

America are easier than passing legislations or changing mindsets to think about others and not just oneself. Where can John the Baptist stand in our midst today to change our minds and mindsets?

Some of the most powerful speakers through the ages have quoted other famous people to give their messages power. People have quoted Ronald Reagan who once said: “Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall!” Or Martin Luther King Jr. saying, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color or their skin, but by the content of their character.” Or John F. Kennedy proclaiming: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

*We count on our forebears to give leverage or power to our cause.* In this case, John the Baptist quoted the famous prophet Isaiah for backup. Isaiah was a big-gun prophet, quoted for Advent readings and Christmas Eve services. Isaiah declared these words to Judah: “A voice cries in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Isaiah 40:3. Do hear the word “repentance” anywhere in Isaiah’s words? No. Still John uses Isaiah’s *authority* to make a case about repentance. Isaiah uses poetic imagery to describe the rough places being made smooth. What are our rough places? Trouble in a marriage? Trouble between a parent and child? Trouble between an employer and employee? Facing death? Those might be some cases. But then we can get into the weeds of rough places when we look at the Halls of Congress; and when we consider children left behind in other countries where they are in danger; when we consider our huge fight against narcotics and our battles against abusive workplace practices. I am aware of more than one individual who was dismissed from his college position just a month before he could have received tenure. Repenting of those kinds of financial

decisions that leave justice outside of the door is a place to start repenting! We can choose lots of places to U-Turn.

As we think about our own sinfulness, we may be hard-pressed to see things that call for repentance. But sometimes sins happen not by commission, but by omission. When we see blatant racism and are afraid to address it; when we learn of blatant sexism and choose to look away; when we drip with sweat for more months than usual due to the climate and don't make personal changes in the fuel we use or the air conditioners we run, we may need to repent.

This week, as I suggested last week, we can make a fearless moral inventory of our sins: not a perfunctory look at them, but a long look. Sometimes people do that toward the end of their life, but wise people consider their actions much earlier. Someone once said that the way to eat an elephant (and truthfully, who would want to do that?) is one bite at a time! Can you choose one action, or make one change that would indicate your repentance to God? Then next week, choose one more action, and follow through. If we can do that together, we'll have a better chance to change the world for Jesus, the cousin of the Roaring Prophet- John the Baptist.

Let us pray: Searching God: you know us deeply. Perhaps you are waiting for us to acknowledge and own our sins. Today we will look *for* them, look *at* them, and turn from them. Change our hearts, O God. Amen.

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