

**SERMON:** My meditation today is based upon the lesson from Luke that Dennis just read for us. The lesson concerns the preaching of John the Baptist, an important person in the opening of the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke devotes much space in his gospel to the ministry of John, weaving the story of John's birth together with the birth story of Jesus - like strands of a rope. In Luke, the word 'ponder' appears often. In Luke 2 we read that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19) Concerning John's birth, Luke notes that "Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them. . ." (Luke 1:65-66) Today we will ponder the story of John's public witness; its meaning for Jesus and its meaning for us.

In telling John's story, Luke writes that the following words from Isaiah apply to John: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord . . ." (Luke 3:4b) One day, while serving as pastor of the church in Lebanon, I looked out my study window and saw several unfamiliar cars parked behind the firehouse - directly across a narrow street from my office at the church. Most firefighters drove pickup trucks, but on this day the parking lot was filled with Lincoln and Cadillac cars. All around the cars were young men dressed in dark suits, each of them talking on cell phones. These were not firefighters; I knew that right away. They looked a lot like those men and women who surround politicians, especially presidential candidates. Sure enough, I later learned, a Presidential candidate had come to speak with the firefighters in the Lebanon Fire Station, and the candidate's advance team was out in the parking lot preparing the way for another visit to another place.

Luke describes John as a 'one-man-advance team' - a 'forerunner' for Jesus, preparing the way. Of course John had no cell phone with which to call ahead, and set up the next stop on Jesus' itinerary. Instead, John prepares the way by preaching "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3:3) Today that message wouldn't go very far, we might say, for it seems 'fringy' - out of the mainstream, negative and unpleasant to hear. In John's time, though, it worked very well. Many went out into the wilderness to hear John preach; people from all walks of life - the wealthy, the poor, and those in between. What was it about repentance that drew them to John? Perhaps they heard something in that unsettling word that we can't hear.

Not long ago, I headed out from my home in Hopkinton on short trip down Interstate 89 to Concord, but at some point I lost track of where I was going - my mind was somewhere else - for I found myself headed south on I-93 toward Manchester, rather than north on I-93 to Concord. My lack of attention to what I was doing was very frustrating, and the miles seemed endless as I waited for an exit so that I could get turned around and back on the right path to Concord. Endeavoring to get turned around and on the right path is the definition of repentance. In repentance, one turns away from a path leading nowhere to a path leading in the right direction. In repentance we find that long-awaited interchange in the highway of life where one can stop the journey to nowhere, and restart the journey to spiritual living. And, just as I will surely find myself going in the wrong

direction down the wrong highway once again, and will wait impatiently for another interchange by which to get turned around once again, so we will find ourselves in need of a turn-around - a repentance - again and again as we seek to lead Christ-honoring lives in a deeply challenging context. We may rightly say that regular repentance is an essential part of healthy spiritual living. Thus understood, I wonder, could repentance ever be heard as something positive in our liberal-minded and progressive churches? Could we ever see yourselves embracing the language of repentance on our website, or in our mission statement?

One Advent season many years ago, knowing that I would be preaching a sermon on repentance, I decided to visit my friends at the Lebanon Fire Department, to seek their advice. I should probably note that I served as both firefighter and Chaplain to the Department for the better part of 25 years, so I knew them well, and they were comfortable enough with me to actually say what they thought, using language I didn't often hear in the church. If you've ever written a sermon, or newsletter article, you may understand what I mean when I say I need a 'reality check' - that after spending hours with the books and thoughts in my study, I need to talk with a real person and see what they think of what I'm doing with my sermon. In Lebanon, my firefighter friends were quite happy to be my reality check. So, on that December day, I walked across the street and up to the lunch room where the firefighters always gather, and asked what they thought I should say in my sermon. They had a numerous suggestions: "Preach against greed! Preach against alcohol and drug abuse! Preach against promiscuous sex and unfaithfulness!" I replied that I had been hoping to have a more positive sermon; one that was *for* something rather than *against* something. They replied that their ideas *were* positive; that if people would stop doing these harmful things, their lives *would* be happier, and the world would be a better place. Strangely enough, these mostly un-churched firefighters were making good sense; for turning away from harmful living is often the beginning of good news. Indeed, Luke writes that John the Baptist's blunt message about repentance is the *beginning* of good news; it is our required preparation for receiving the One who comes from God.

So, what does John the Baptist mean when he calls his listeners to repentance? As we've already heard, he is simply asking them to turn their lives around. He is asking them to take a step of faith, leaving behind that which is part of an old and failing way of living, and embracing that which holds promise for new life. In a familiar lesson often read during Advent, Isaiah describes a world in which those who turn toward God forsake the making of war; they "beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks and "study to war no more." (Isaiah 2:4) In our lesson for today, those who accept John the Baptist's call to repentance are instructed to 'share extra clothing with those who have none. Tax collectors are told to become exactly honest in their assessing of taxes, and soldiers to no longer use their power to extort money from the innocent.' (Luke 3:10-14 NRSV) In each case, repentance means acting in new ways; ways that are in harmony with the greatest commandment - loving God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind, and loving one's neighbor as oneself!

"Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord!"  
Luke 3:7-18

If repentance means turning away from greed, violence, and abusiveness, it can be good news. If repentance means learning to recognize and deal with personal anger and frustration so that others are not hurt, it is good news. If repentance means admitting alcohol or drug abuse and turning from it, it is good news. If repentance means turning away from unfaithfulness of thought or action with respect to marriage vows, it is good news. If repentance means doing the right thing for our employees or tenants or neighbors or family, it is good news. Whenever we turn away from what is hurtful or wrong, and choose the more loving and Christ-like way, it is good news.

In Advent, the love of God comes to earth in the form of an infant, inviting us into a life of love and loving. Turning toward that love may be more important than we think. Some years ago, I was invited to share in a very remarkable memorial service. After two brief readings from the Bible, I encouraged the ten or twelve people present to speak about the one who had died; to share their memories, or offer comment about him as a person. The first person began; "He was stubborn." Others chimed in: "He was persistent." "He was dirty." "He didn't trust anybody, thought others were stealing from him." A niece shared that he had told the family not to come around any more. So why were these people at his memorial service? Each of them, in one way or another, had been faithful, loving, and helpful to him. They all admitted that he made loving very difficult; but they found that their love was more stubborn than were his difficult ways. And, what might have been a time of remembering the legacy of a bitter old man became a time of witnessing to the wonder of love.

Advent heralds the love of God coming to earth in the form of a child. Love comes into a difficult world; a world of war, unfaithfulness, duplicity, and greed. Love comes in all its innocence and beauty to change the world; and for each person that turns to greet this love and welcome this love as one's own; it is good news to the world. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," the Baptist preached. May we do just that. Amen.