

Sermon – 12-9-2018
Second Sunday of Advent – Luke 3
By
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Yes, it's that time of year for John the Baptist to show up in our Scriptures. He's one of those characters in Scripture that probably wouldn't get very far in a congregational pastor search process. From other Scriptures, we know that he ate locusts and wild honey, and lived by himself back in the wilderness, a wild man. People that look like that, we often avoid when we meet them in the streets. Then, what are his first words in the Gospel of Luke? "You brood of vipers!" Not exactly the most seeker-sensitive sermon title. He proceeds to launch into something that we might call fire-and-brimstone preaching. That's usually the only thing that you can say about someone who is talking about axes cutting down trees. I don't really think he's making it past the first interview.

And yet, he's the one God sent. He's the one that God uses to do his preparing. You may remember that last week, we talked about how God is the one doing the preparing during the Advent season, not us. If we look at the prophecy from Isaiah that Luke cites, we could think that might not be the case. The voice, after all, is calling "Prepare the way for the Lord." But that voice is not calling to us; that voice is calling to John. John is the tool that God is going to use to prepare the way of the Lord. And look at the rest of that prophesy. Valleys shall be filled in. Mountains will be made low. Crooked roads will become straight. That's the preparation that John is doing for the coming of the Son of Man.

In order to do that preparation, John has some heavy lifting to do. Mountains don't just flatten themselves, unless you're Mt. St. Helens. Valleys don't fill themselves in without heavy equipment. And when you are constructing something new, you need to make sure that the foundations are done correctly, so that it is something that will last. Some of you know that we've had to have the sewer line replaced at the parsonage, and that happened early this week. In order to get the old, fragile line out, and replace it with a new, strong one, there was a lot of heavy equipment involved, and a lot of dirt got moved around. And when you are working on projects like that, you never know what you're going to find. I went into the backyard about two hours after they had started working. A guy pops his head out of a five-foot deep trench and asks me, "Did you lose a car?" I did a double take, and asked him what he meant. He meant *this*: an old crushed car buried in the backyard. They were able to extract some of it, including *this* piece of an old car grill. They would not have found this if they were not digging, to prepare the place for the work that needed to be done.

That's what John the Baptist is doing: he's digging deep. Notice the comments he makes to various groups. To those with two shirts, you should share with one who has none. To the tax collectors, don't overcollect. To the soldier, don't extort people. He cuts right to the heart of the fruit they need to bear in keeping with repentance. Why does he go there? He goes there because God goes there. He digs right down to the rusted, crushed cars that are poisoning our souls. And those sins, deep down, that seem foundational, are the exact things that God wants to root out. It takes a lot of heavy equipment. It takes a lot of hands-on work. But God is in the business of extracting that from you.

But we don't want to let it go. Tax collectors live pretty well because of their overcollections. Those with two shirts like to hang on to those, just in case of a rainy day. Those who are socially popular don't want to get less popular by saying things that point out the less fortunate. We don't want to share space in our head with God's guidance, because we know how to live our lives. We like our junk right where it is, thank you very much. But God doesn't. In order to do the work that he wants to do, the preparation that needs to be done, he's going to all lengths, he's using every tool in the book, to show you what is underneath your surface: a poor, miserable sinner.

Now, once all this darkness is exposed, we could dwell there. We could sit here and browbeat ourselves over those sins that we can't stop doing. We can wallow in our despair. And being afraid of that can lead us to avoid digging up the cars in our backyard, pretending that they're not there. But the despair is exactly where John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Father want us. Because when we finally despair of our own abilities, that is when we are finally ready to hear of the grace and forgiveness of God. That's the preparation that John the Baptist is doing: showing us the sin deep in our hearts, and pointing it out to the one who can do the extraction. John the Baptist is the beeping metal detector, so that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, can remove the foreign object from our hearts. That's why he's coming. That's why he's preparing. That's why he's here. His death and resurrection are the ultimate excavator, expertly removing our sin and putting in its place forgiveness, joy, and eternal life. Things might be torn up for a while, but the ultimate purpose is to bring you into his kingdom at the last day. And he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion, through all his tools, Word, Sacrament, and yes, scraggly-looking preachers from the wilderness. AMEN.