

“Gloom or Glory” – Advent 2 – Dec 10/06 - Luke 3: 1-6

Wasn't that a wonderful Christmas Dinner last night? Many thanks to all who rolled up their sleeves and dove in to make it possible! And didn't you enjoy singing the Christmas songs – even some carols? It really gets you into the Christmas spirit, doesn't it? And so doesn't it seem a little odd that while everyone else is playing Christmas carols at this time of year, the church is looking at John the Baptist? Doesn't it seem a bit curious that while other people are hanging tinsel and decorations, we are listening to the voice of a crusty old prophet screeching about repentance and coming judgment? That instead of cheerful hellos, seasons greetings, and jingle Bells, we focus on a strange man berating his listeners and talking about things to come?

Yes, I would agree it seems a bit odd, but I would also argue that we have a very good reason for doing this, that we are following scriptural tradition. After all, the authors of all the Gospels felt it necessary to begin their Gospel story with an introduction to John the Baptist, or more properly if less common, John the Baptiser. Aren't you ever curious as to why they did that? Of all of the events at the beginning of the story of God's grace being made manifest in Jesus, why is the common starting point from all four Gospel writers a glimpse not at Jesus, but at John?

I believe there are two parts to the answer. First, the gospel authors needed to address a “hot topic” of the day, and that was “who was more important, Jesus or John?” For us it's not even an question, but it seems that it was an issue both during Jesus' ministry and more so afterward. The gospel authors take pains to let their early readers hear John's followers, having been sent by him to Jesus, find confirmation when they ask Jesus, “are you the one?”. Those gospel authors also let their early readers (and us!) hear John himself proclaim that Jesus is so much more important that he is not worthy of even tying Jesus' sandals.

It follows that if the authors of the Gospels went to so much trouble to show that Jesus was superior to John, there must have been a considerable number of people both within and outside the early church who thought otherwise, and there is considerable evidence that this was the case. Right from the start there were many people who believed that John – and thus John's somewhat cantankerous message of repentance and coming doom – was not only as important but more so than Jesus' message of forgiveness, grace, and divine mercy and love. Even the leaders of the newly-forming church argued bitterly over this very issue, with James and Peter and the Jerusalem Party standing firm on the necessity for rules and strict adherence to the old ways of earning God's forgiveness, against Paul's passionate, Spirit-inspired vision of freedom through God's grace in Christ, of a grace and mercy that covered Jew and Greek, male and female, sinner and saint alike.

Sadly we can see that very same struggle continues today. Within the church, within our denomination, even within our own presbytery, there are those who would stand firmly and rigidly with James and Peter, and argue (often to their own surprise, when they have ears to hear) that salvation in Christ is a very ‘iffy’ thing, so fragile and offered so tenuously that it can be and even is nullified for the slightest of transgressions, never mind for major ones. There are good and faithful people who continue to portray God's love as conditional, difficult to obtain, easy to lose, and something to be feared, who harp on behaviour as our self-controlled and self-controlling means of not only obtaining but keeping God's grace.

But there are those also who hear Paul's version, and declare with rejoicing that God is not capricious and has offered a salvation so complete, so utterly strong in Christ that once accepted can never be broken, stolen, withdrawn, go stale or moldy, that can never rot away, that can never allow us to be separated from the love of God in Christ. These are the people who see God's mercy and redemption as an unearned gift of grace – indeed a gift that cannot be earned – offered in exchange for a faith in Christ; who hear his call to treat others with that same mercy and tenderness and caring and love; who, being overwhelmed by this magnificent gift of love try to live a life of loving service in response.

Yes, the struggle between gloom and glory against which the gospel writers wrote, pointing out the supremacy of Christ's call to compassion over John's "brood of vipers", continues today, and probably will until Christ's return.

So, if John the Baptist was put in his place by the gospel authors, what was that place? If he was not as 'important' as Jesus, what then was his role, or can we dismiss him entirely? No, we can't. It is clear that the gospel authors understood John to be a prophet, proclaiming the coming of the messiah, the chosen One of God, and who ultimately recognized Jesus as being the very One whose coming he was called to proclaim. All of the gospel authors saw John as himself the fulfillment of prophecy, as the one who fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah, "a voice in the wilderness crying, prepare the way of the Lord." John the Evangelist even quotes John the Baptist as declaring himself to be that very voice, as being the one calling for the preparation of the way for the Lord, whom he would confirm as Jesus.

What a wonderful metaphor that image of preparing the way is. For the prophet Isaiah, sharing the burden and the shame and the pain of exile in Babylon, the image he saw was a superhighway to redemption, a multi-lane freeway opened up for the Jewish exiles to travel back to Jerusalem, and thus back into the presence of their God. It was an image of an easy route back to God, gentle slopes, soft curves, smooth pavement – completely different from the difficult goat and camel trails they had been forced to walk over the mountains on their way into captivity and exile.

These days that kind of road building seems pretty simple. Rocks can be easily drilled and blasted, huge equipment makes leveling the hills and filling in the valleys a routing task. Not so in ancient times, when building any roads was a long, dirty and laborious task. Thousands, sometimes tens of thousands of people provided the power to move the earth one basket at a time. It took the effort and cooperation of many, many people to make a wide, smooth road.

And now we have been invited to work on this 'way of the Lord', turning steep hills into gentle inclines, filling in deep and dangerous valleys, paving the road smooth, all so that others may have an easier task of meeting the Lord. The 'way of the Lord' is not just a highway down which Jesus can ride in all his finery – he proved that to the world and to us by walking our dusty, dirty streets on the way to his death on the cross. Isaiah's 'way of the Lord' is also a smooth highway for throngs of people to travel to meet God. John the Baptist was called to his unique prophetic task of preparing the way for the Lord Jesus; we are called to help prepare the way for people to meet the Lord.

Now, for the life of me, I can't understand how some people think that making the road difficult – putting up sin-seeking inspection posts, digging ditches of exclusion, paving with the shards of humiliation to shred even the most repentant knees, placing stones and rocks and boulders of conflict, making sure the road is so narrow that two can't walk side by side – I can't understand how they think that makes better travelers to meet the Lord. It seems clear to me that the two or three or ten zealots, winners of some kind of religious 'iron man' competition, get to meet the same Jesus who welcomes the throngs who travel on the highways and byways carved out by those who want to reflect unto others the love they have experienced.

I for one would rather pitch in to help smooth the path for others, would like to join the road gangs making it easier, not harder, for people to discover the incredibly magnificent love of God in Christ. Remove those rocks of harsh words and conflict; fill in the potholes of uncaring; cut a pass through the mountains of exclusivism and rejection; fill in the valleys of discouragement and denial; straighten out the sharp curves of power struggle. Let us also help to prepare the way of the Lord, paving a wide, smooth highway of reconciliation, of peace, of comforting his people, so that arm-in-arm, a thousand lanes wide, we may walk together in joy and thanksgiving to meet our Lord. Once that preparation has been started, then it's time to meet the mighty saviour, born a tender child, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.