

This time of year is often filled with parties and gatherings. If you're the host of the gathering you know the importance of preparation.

For a holiday dinner party you might get out your Christmas decorations, purchase a tree, bake a pie, cook the meal, and find the right music for a memorable time. If your house is anything like mine there are bathrooms to clean, floors to sweep, and all the tasks of making the home shine.

So too in today's reading from Luke we get a glimpse of John the Baptist's preparations. We hear that John proclaimed repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We are told of the connection of this proclamation to the prophet Isaiah and the need to prepare the way of the Lord making paths straight, valleys filled, and mountains lowered so that all may see the salvation of God. Yet this preparation is not for dinner parties and holiday gatherings. This preparation is for the Christ child. To prepare for this event John challenges us to take on both personal and corporate self-examination.

This self-examination is much like when we get ready for houseguests. When guests are coming over that loose towel rack gets fixed, the leaky toilet gets at least a second look, burned out light bulbs are replaced, and an e-mail to the landlord about the broken door handle is finally sent. With guests on the way we may examine our surroundings with a new perspective – suddenly the cluttered countertops are organized, the broken chair inadequate, the silverware too tarnished. “Preparing for guests demands self-examination as much as it involves a “to do” list.”<sup>1</sup>

As we journey in this Advent season, John the Baptist meets us with a self-examination challenge. We’re called to examine our lives, our values, and our priorities. To be clear, in today’s texts we do not find a suggestion that our self-examination will bring about the Holy One. After all, there is nothing we can do to receive the gift of God’s presence and love. In baptism, in communion, and throughout our

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<sup>1</sup> Beach-Verhey, Kathy. *Fasting on the Word: Year C, Vol 1*. “Luke 3:1-6: Homiletical Perspective”, p 45-49.

lives God's presence is a pure gift. However, we can prepare ourselves to hear this good news in new and faithful ways.

Today John the Baptist doesn't give us a glimpse of what exactly he means by repentance— we'll have to wait for next week's reading for that. Yet, Luke's choice of words in the Greek does communicate a function of repentance. The Greek word translated in our text as repentance is μετάνοιας (meh-tah-**noi**-ahs) and is not mere regret for past misdeeds. It's more than saying, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me." μετάνοιας means a change of mind and heart; it's the kind of inner transformation that bears visible results.<sup>2</sup> Whether we're dealing with individual or corporate sin, one of the greatest barriers to healing is the human tendency to confess so that we can be forgiven. The problem with that is that asking for or even expecting forgiveness simply because we have admitted our faults turns the focus of the act away from restoration of the relationship

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2711](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2711)

to preservation of self – and that becomes a barrier to the very healing God desires. So you see, the goal of confession – both individual and corporate—is not merely the removal of consequences, namely punishment, but rather the goal is the transformation of the one who has sinned. Repentance does not undo past sins, but it does unbind people from them.<sup>3</sup>

With that in mind, the liturgical professor Melinda Quivik says, when we gather together we see that “the poor among us lack enough food; we have not adequately cared for the sick and elderly. Earth’s health is shunted aside in the name of jobs. We sacrifice animals, plants, soil, water, and air for the sake of those who wield the most power. The word of the Lord, spoken by someone named Malachi [in our first reading], is a voice meant for all people. Malachi lays down

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2711](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2711)

what John the Baptist also tells us: the Lord is not pleased with your lives and your intentions -- our lives, our intentions. Repent!"<sup>4</sup>

"And so we, too, are called in this season: to attend to and prepare our inner terrain so that we may welcome [the message of] Christ in our lives and in the world."<sup>5</sup> We are called in Advent to take a serious look. To confess the ways we've gained by inequality and oppression. To notice the loose ends that need to be tied up. To attend to the relationships that are damaged. To prepare our lives so we can come to experience the incarnation of our God in a new manner. In Advent we are like preparing our home for the delivery of a large sofa or table. We clear the space, we clean the space, and we alter our schedule for the delivery. With these preparations it requires us to be honest with ourselves – do we have money for that

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1529](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1529)

<sup>5</sup> <http://pastorblog.cumcdebary.org/?p=3216>

purchase, do we have enough space, and do we have enough time to prepare? Self-examination is key in this text.

Yet, if today's text only leaves us with a message of self-examination I'm not convinced that's good news. The good news in today's passage is actually found in that complicated list of rules and leaders that began our reading. Sure these rules give us some historical context, but they also make a key theological claim in Luke. You see, "in Luke the word of God comes neither to the Emperor nor to the governors, and not even to the high priest. It comes to simple, John, son of Zechariah, whom Luke introduces in the first chapter...

Compared to the political and religious leaders of his day, [John] was just an ordinary guy – and yet, God chose John, and not the luminaries of his time, to be the messenger. God sent the message to John, not in Rome, not in Jerusalem, but out in the wilderness. Not the seat of political or religious power, but the wilderness, the often scary and confusing place where God has spoken to God's people in

the past and through which God had led God's people to a new and promised life."<sup>6</sup>

And frankly, if God can use a nobody like John the Baptist to prepare the way, then God most certainly can use you and me. To really grasp that concept we might change the beginning of the reading from Luke today to read: In the fifteenth year of the twenty-first century, when Barack Obama was President of the United States, and Bruce Rauner was governor of Illinois, and Rahm Emanuel was mayor of Chicago, and Elizabeth Eaton was presiding bishop of the ELCA, the world of the Lord came to you! God comes to you freely and completely through no action of your own. Then you are given an opportunity to be a part of preparing the world for the good news and the hope that our God brings.

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<sup>6</sup> Beach-Verhey, Kathy. *Fasting on the Word: Year C, Vol 1*. "Luke 3:1-6: Homiletical Perspective", p 45-49.

This gift of preparation leads us to what we began last week focusing on hope. Today we continue to interact with the tree we created last week while we looked at hope. This week take a moment to write on a green post-it note the ways you prepare to experience God's presence in your life. (Congregation members are given a few moments to think.) Things you might think of to engage your preparations this Advent might be self-examination, perhaps it's prayer, reading the bible, meditation, serving others, giving to those in need, or the many other ways. Once you've written down the ways you prepare in Advent to experience God's presence, you're invited to stick your note at the foot of the tree like grass either during the Hymn following confession, during communion, or after service.

Friends in this busy month of preparations for events and holiday gatherings, hear the voice of John the Baptist reminding us to prepare ourselves to see the presence of God. Be reminded that our



God is all around us – in the busy streets, in our co-workers, and in our families. Today’s text asks us, “How might you best prepare to catch a glimpse of God this holiday season?” Friends, let us prepare the way of the Lord and appreciate the gift of God’s grace. Amen.