

John H. Bonner, III
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The Prophets

Storming out of the humdrum that is our life come those called the Prophets. We New Testament sorts don't spend much time thinking about Prophets until this time each year when our onetime 'storming' personality comes out of the wilderness to shake us out of our lethargy and make us pay attention for a couple of weeks.

The introduction of John the Baptist's ministry in Luke is rich with exultation and expectation. The call to repentance is not a wallowing in recrimination and recounting of past evil and sin, but the conferring of a long-promised and long-awaited deliverance. John's manifestation is firmly dated with the recitation of the names of seven leaders of both Roman and Judean influence. It is not lost on me that the "word of God" does not come from all these important people but from an unknown prophet out of the wilderness. During a time of political upheaval and oppression, John was being prepared "*in the wilderness*" until the hour of his vocation came. For three decades within the tense Roman occupation of Judah he was unrecognized as the one who would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah...."*The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make*

his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” But fulfill it he did!

Us 21st century types do not take note of the fact that God’s work always proceeds among the poor and dispossessed. A middle-class church in a nominally Christian society that enjoys religious liberty will have a hard time grasping the fact that Luke does not use these terms in a merely metaphorical or spiritual sense.

Also of note is that the redemptive events that began with John in a remote corner of Judea were, by God’s design, the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s concern for the salvation of “*all flesh.*” Luke is strong on this understanding of faith. In our study of The Acts of the Apostles it is a constant that God reaches far beyond those who are religiously tuned in. We tend to limit God’s activity to our own kind of people and the causes that are socially and ethically important to us. But God’s way is a ‘boundary breaker.’”

What was the truth that John was telling? What was the message that was so urgent that he had to get it across even at the risk of his life? It was the news that all would be well at last; that the long night was nearly over,

and that the day was about to break; that the God who had apparently abandoned his people was coming back: coming to rule, coming to judge, coming to forgive. It was the Advent message...

The Advent message, Isaiah's message for his hearers, is that this God is coming to judge the world by the law of love. ... The reason that the true God will come to right all wrongs in the world (and that's what judgment really means) is not because he is a fierce bully but precisely because he is the bridegroom who wants to woo and win his bride; because he is the shepherd who longs to carry the lambs close to his heart; because he is the servant who is wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. If this is what the true God is like, it is the fierce bullies --- the Herods of the world --- who are in for a shock. This is the God whose coming judgment will be based upon love. This is the God whose word will stand forever, while the grass withers and the flower fades.

John the Baptist explodes onto the world's canvas after years of prophetic quiet. He has spent 3 decades awaiting this work for which he is born. God had told him this is the message the world needs to hear but understand the world never wants to hear this word.

God has given graphic examples of what the people Israel have in store if they don't straighten up and fly right. Jeremiah smashes an earthen

jar to bits in front of the princes of Judah and tells them the urn represents their idol infested world and the message is clear that God will not have them live this way and be His.

Prophets lived on the edge always. John the Baptist confronts Herod about marrying his brothers wife. Nathan tells King David to his face that he is an adulterer and a crook. And Isaiah screams at God “How long, O Lord?”

The prophets in today’s lessons offer three words. John the Baptist says “Prepare.” Paul tells us to “Discern.” Figure out your world and what’s going on in it. And from the Apocrypha we hear from Baruch, secretary of Jeremiah, that we need to “Change.” We are to change everything about the life we live and point all towards the One who created and sustains us.

If there is to be room in our lives for the One who is coming we must ‘prepare’ and ‘discern’ and ‘change’ as the prophets call us to do this day. The human condition always requires a reorientation of that which is primary. We start this year as Christians in a world filled with war and uncertainty. We live in a world where 16,000 children every day die somewhere in this world of hunger related issues. To get closer to home we live in a county where over 60% of the children are on free or partial lunch and probably eat very little on the weekends when the school is not

providing their sustenance. We do not have to go far to make a difference in our world.

That 'baptism of repentance' is a life turned towards the ways of God.