



Preparing the Way

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Luke 3:1-6

He was just a voice in the untamed wilds of Judea, but a voice crying for preparation and a transformative change. Why is it that we too quickly brush his ministry aside in our quest to get to Jesus? Might we not be short-changing the gospel of Christ for not understanding the importance of the one who came to pave the way for acceptance of Messiah?

John came to prepare the way. He spoke to the Jews of baptism and repentance. Perhaps most interestingly, he called them to return to God! What would a call to dedicated service to God look like in our lives?

What audacity! If there had been one error to cast aspersion on Israel over the centuries, this had been the issue, but it was settled on return from exile in Babylon. It was there the nation had come to understand fully their need to serve Yahweh, and Yahweh alone. They had come back to the land of promise, the land given to Abraham, with the full understanding of their responsibility to serve and worship God without the addition of any idols and fertility cultus in their midst. That issue had long been settled. Then John comes along with his message. It was an affront to Judaism. It was ludicrous! If there was one issue they had finally settled, this was it! They were the people of Yahweh for this first time in their entire history!

Back in the days of Moses, they had served their idols alongside Yahweh. Before Egypt, Isaac' and Jacob's family members had been idolatrous. On leaving the wilderness to enter the Promised Land, Moses felt it necessary to issue the charge to set their other gods aside. Joshua issued the same charge at the end of his ministry, but idolatry remained the norm throughout the period of the Judges. David ushered in a new era, of worshipping Yahweh, but that quickly dissipated under Solomon and his sons, getting worse and worse until the exile. At the time of Jesus, however, this was no longer an issue. They were no longer an idolatrous nation! Or were they? Might we also need a call to awaken to a new life of dedicated service to God?

There was something behind John's words, however, some reality which called the people to pay attention to his message. They responded positively for some reason. His message struck a chord, even if the nation was no longer embroiled in the worship of other competing gods. John called them to something deeper than they had yet experienced. He called them to give their lives completely to God. He was not so interested in all the external elements of ritualistic Judaism. He was focused on a wholly different aspect of worshipping God. Are we ready let go of any ritualism that interferes with our service to God?

To be sure, some followed him, heard his words and were baptized without understanding his message fully. They attached themselves to the movement of the crowd. They knew John was saying something important, even if they did not understand it. They went through the motions of accepting his words, as though to hedge their bets. Possibly, their actions were taken simply in the hope that by doing so they might hurry the coming of Messiah. They recognized something in his message that rang true, even when they could not fully grasp its significance.

They were all about preparing the way for Messiah. If that meant going through motions of repentance, if it meant making a show of beginning a new life with God, they were willing to do so.

They were ready for a new reality of some kind. Whatever it was, it had to be better than what they were already experiencing. John offered some new experience of God and a new approach to linking their lives with God's will and purposes. They were all in.

Some understood. Some understood some. Some understood only that something important was happening. They all recognized that somehow their relationship to God up to this point was lacking. It was not enough to be Abraham's descendants and observers of the commandment through Moses. That had been tried for several generations, yet the Romans still occupied the land. They yearned for something more, even without knowing what they yet lacked. Deep down, they knew God wanted more for them. Are we willing to admit our needs for more of God?

John spoke his message from the wilderness, the unsettled land that lay outside political control and dominance. It was the frontier, the wild, the untamed place where God was deemed to be in control and so often in Israel's past had spoken through the prophets. Luke takes special care to contrast that untamed land where John preached with the lands ruled by Herod, Pilate, Anas, and Caiaphas. He understood John's message to run counter to the prevailing words of institutional power, both within and without Judaism. Here was a fresh message, one that countered the power of political structure with the active, untamed power of God.

For some, John's message echoed a sense that the power structures of the day failed to account for leading the nation to worship God properly. There has always been a tension between institutional structures and the realities of personal commitment and trust in God. John's message was a cry to return once again to assuming personal responsibility before God. He spoke nothing about dependence upon a system, but of actually living out God's call for applying justice, equity, and love in all our relationships. To John, this was what it meant to prepare the way for Messiah. Repentance would take root in changed action, and that transformation would pave the way for Messiah's arrival.

John's message is better spelled out in other texts, but Luke's contrasting John in the desert with political leadership in the halls of power is telling. It contrasts Luke's understanding that the message of Jesus would be counter-institutional, counter-political, transformative from the untamed margins of society, where people yearned for release and access to God's initiatives of redemption. Are we prepared for that kind of untamed transformation?

A baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins was a wholly new concept in Judaism, but that is what John preached. His message stood outside the parameters of Jewish sacrificial law. There was nothing here about ritual worship in the Temple setting and structure, but worship of God directly through a change of attitude.

Listening to John's words from the perspective of knowing Jesus' gospel, his words do not sound revolutionary, yet that is exactly what they were. God is not to be approached so much through the institutional forms and rituals of sacrifice. God is rather to be approached on the basis of a desire to be reconciled to God's purposes. Are we ready for that quality of reconciliation with God?

At its heart, that is what repentance is all about. It is turning an about face in our lives. It is about giving up on our quests for power, position, pride, status, control, and other self-centered issues. It is turning our lives around to accept what God has waiting for us. John said that was what Jews of his day needed: to be introduced to a new life in God. It was a conversion to God through repentance, preached to a people who claimed already to belong in service to God. If John's audience needed repentance into a new life with God, are we much different?

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