

All Shall See

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius,
when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,
and Herod was ruler of Galilee
*(and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea
and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene
during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas)*
the word of God came to John son of Zechariah
in the wilderness.

He went into all the region around the Jordan,
proclaiming a baptism of repentance
for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written
in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
“The voice of one crying out 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.’”

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Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

Earlier this week I was having a conversation with some folks, about what I don't remember. What I do remember, though, is that at a point I made a comment about someone, likening them to "Julie McCoy, Cruise Director." They just looked at me like I had two heads and was from another planet. I said, "You, know?!? *Love Boat*, Julie McCoy...Cruise Director." They were clueless as to what I was talking about, and started to look at me as if I had become *untethered*.

II.

If you've been around here long enough, you will have surmised that John The Baptist is one of my favorite characters in the Biblical cast. John was a bit of a wild man, and of the wilds, which appeals to me at a very basic level. The Gospel of Mark describes him as wearing, "clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist," and a diet consisting of "locusts and wild honey." Of course, my affinity for John the Baptist was cemented by Grandmother (God bless her) who referred to my years of training sled dogs in Minnesota and living on the road out of a VW bus, as my "time in the wilderness." (Oh, it was *all* of that and more, Gram; but thanks for your graciousness.)

III.

John the Baptist was also a straight shooter; he said it like it is, and told it like it was. His message, and theological understanding of the role he was asked to play was, to me, spot on. Today's scripture reading from Luke chapter 3 describes it as, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Not "repentance" as it is understood these days, with notions of remorse and self-flagellation but, rather, in the sense of the original Greek, "metanoia," sharing the same root as the more familiar word, metamorphosis, meaning "to turn from," or "to make a change."

Though phrased differently, this is what lies at the heart of the Reformed Tradition as evidenced by the motto of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*, which translates as “the church must always be reforming”; or, as we Presbyterians express it, “The church reformed, always reforming.”

IV.

However, it is impossible to reform oneself unless one turns from, or changes, that which first formed them (thinking here of Original Sin, capital “S”) or from what we, ourselves, allow us to be formed by (the sin of our own actions and decisions, lower case “s”). Of course, such an understanding would seem to emphasize a theology which believes it within the realm of possibility and human ability to actually effect such change, or to turn from such sin. Which is absolutely correct.

It is not through human effort, however, that such change, turning and repentance occurs and is made manifest; but, rather, through the grace of God won by the effort of the cross of Christ. When we repent, we turn *from* sin and turn, instead, *toward* the grace of God; for this is all that is required for us to enact the changes we all know we must. Actually, it would be more accurate to say, to enact the changes that at least *some* of us know we must.

V.

This past Friday, Linda and I were delighted to share an evening with our wonderful new neighbors at the lake, Mike and Kris; along with their friend Paul, who is a frequent visitor and great guy. We began with appetizers at our place then, for dinner, we went next door to enjoy the beef brisket Kris had cooked low and long in her “Big Green Egg” smoker grill; finishing the evening with Linda’s famous blueberry buckle coffee cake.

Though the food was terrific, the company and conversation was even more so. We talked and laughed for hours, about a wide range of topics. Though one is always careful to avoid bringing up politics in social situations (especially these days) we eventually found ourselves ending the evening with quite a vigorous and insightful conversation about the state our nation.

VI.

Surprisingly, though, what could easily have been a left wing “pile-on” of the right was, instead, a lament about our nation as whole, and what has changed in our respective life-times. At one point, Mike mentioned a book he was reading, The Dying Citizen: How Progressive Elites, Tribalism, and Globalization Are Destroying the Idea of America, by Victor Davis Hanson. Being a progressive elite I, of course, tuned right in.

The next morning I went online to research the book, clearly written from the perspective of the right, and found this summary. Hanson asserts:

The evisceration of the middle class over the last fifty years has made many Americans dependent on the federal government. Open borders have undermined the idea of allegiance to a particular place. Identity politics have eradicated our collective civic sense of self. And a top-heavy administrative state has endangered personal liberty, along with formal efforts to weaken the Constitution.

VII.

Though I could easily articulate the irony in each of these statements, and crafted a equally convincing argument from a center-left perspective, I have to concede the verity of the book’s conclusion, regardless of the underlying premises used to arrive at it. That evening, however, Mike summed it up best, saying that “America” was once something everyone could subscribe to and, having done so, would become part of it. He then cited the example of Walter Cronkite, the imminent and universally trusted CBS News anchor. For *years*, just about everyone in the nation would tune-in to see Walter Cronkite report the news and, with a poignancy which would later become ironic, end each night’s program with the words, “And that’s the way it is.” And, each night after Mr. Cronkite signed off, almost all in our nation tuned in to watch *The Patridge Family, Happy Days, Laverne and Shirley, Fantasy Island* and, of course, *The Love Boat*.

VIII.

Of course, as time marched on, we all came to realize it isn’t that way at all, nor, almost certainly, was it ever. The idea of “One Nation Under God” is a construct or a myth at the least, or a deception at the worst. The truth is, we’ve always been a nation divided by race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, geography, religion, you name it. With the rugged

individualist in each of us happy to draw any line in whatever sand we find ourselves, we've made an art form out of declaring just how "un-alike" we really are from each other.

Of course, the advent of social media and the countless number of TV channels, radio stations and internet sites have made it all the more easier for us to ensconce ourselves in the sandbox prisons of our own making. Whereas Walther Cronkite was once able to say, "And that's the way it is," it would now seem impossible to agree on what that "it" is, even in broad strokes; if there is, in fact, an "it" at all.

IX.

The truth is, as a nation, we have become untethered: untethered from one another and untethered from who we are and from where we first began. However, taking a page from our own Reformed Tradition, the church isn't the only element in society which should always be reforming.

Perhaps it is sheer nativity, and if so I embrace it gladly, but my experience is change is usually the very last thing we, as humans, are willing to do. However, we *will* turn from something once we see "it" for what it is; or, if necessary, first accept the truth that there is, in fact, an "it" for us to see. Mind you, what I am advocating isn't a "*re*-turn" to what "was"; be that real or imagined. Rather, what is required, always, is the turn to a *new* way of being; as a person, as church, as a nation and, most importantly, as the world.

X.

We have spent a great deal of time this morning considering repentance, as advocated by John the Baptist in today's scripture. Deservedly so, as the awareness and willingness to make change is a critical spiritual discipline. However, as was stated earlier, let us be mindful that change, turning and repentance are only ever made manifest through the grace of God...once we see that grace for ourselves.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John the Baptist proclaims: "The voice of one crying out 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.'

XI.

In today's reading, John heralds the arrival of a poor carpenter from Nazareth, the Son of God born in a manger. As the Church Reformed always reforming winding through the Season of Advent, over ways which are not yet straight or smooth, we persist in the belief, and proclaim the hope, that all flesh *shall* see the salvation of God. For *we* see God's grace teeming all around us; tethering us to each other, to our neighbors and to our God. With all due respect to Walter Cronkite, *that* is the way it *really* is. Amen.