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12/5/21—University Presbyterian Church
Luke 3:1-16

THE SUMMONS

The beginning of our text today from the Gospel of Luke is a Who's Who of the powerful. "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." If Luke simply wanted to establish the time frame for his story, he could have accomplished that by mentioning only the first reference: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius." But he doesn't stop with this one reference. Instead, the gospel writer goes on to include a detailed litany of all the current political rulers as well as two religious leaders of the Jewish community. As we will remember, ancient Palestine was under the domination of the Roman Empire. Every one of the rulers mentioned retained tremendous power and dominated the Jewish people with fear and oppression. The two religious leaders Luke mentions, the high priests, exercised great power within the Jewish community and were notorious for their collaboration with the Romans. As Luke recites each person's name in this passage, it is as if he is stacking block upon block upon block to create an impression of an impenetrable fortress of might. We the reader should be rightly intimidated by this recitation of political and social power.

This is what Luke wants us to feel. He wants us to feel this so that he can then lay before us a sharp contrast. Before this fortress of power stands John, son of Zechariah. The man we call John the Baptist was a poor man, born among poor people, who had, by all appearance, no power whatsoever. Except for one—one very important power. The word of God. That is the

contrast Luke sets up for us. The fortress of powerful men versus the power of God in the vessel of an ordinary man named John.

It's this power, the Word of God, that sets things into motion. John is summoned to prepare the way of the Lord—not the way of Caesar, not the way of Pilate, not the way of the high priests, but the way of the Lord. But to whom does John bring this message, this Word of God? The gospel writer of Luke positions John the Baptist before this bastion of earthly powers and then has him turn to look at the people of God and summon us to repent. Repentance is a call to change. Repentance means turning in a new direction.

But doesn't that seem odd? I mean, after detailing all those powerful people, why would John the Baptist look at the people, at us, and call *us* to change? Shouldn't his message be directed toward the powerful ones who exploit and oppress and harm? We know from what comes later in the gospel accounts that John does indeed turn his criticism against the powerful, and is arrested and beheaded for doing so. But John also levies his critique against the ordinary people, those who came out to be baptized by him in the wilderness.

Could it be that John understands the influence such worldly powers have upon our hearts and minds and behaviors? We may fail to understand the ways we are frequently shaped by and grow to imitate the forces and values that dominate our culture. When leaders bully and use intimidating rhetoric, our society sees a rise of intolerance and hostile behaviors. Surrounded as we are by a consumeristic culture, are we surprised that our lifestyles and habits often reflect those values? A culture that elevates the individual and personal rights above all else may understandably foster selfishness and a disregard for the common good.

John the Baptist takes the people to task for the ways they have absorbed and imitated the values of the oppressive and exploitive forces of their day. Following his summons to repent,

some people ask John what they should do. How can they change? And John lays out before them some of the ways they have succumbed to the worldly forces of harm and what they should do. He says, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. And the same goes for those who have food.” He tells the tax collectors who were known for adding on excessive commissions to the taxes they were collecting, “collect no more than the amount prescribed to you.” He tells the soldiers to stop using their brute force and threats of harm to extort money from people and to treat people fairly. Do you see how John is promoting a way of being that is the opposite of the values lived out by dominating forces? John calls the people to repent, which means turning and going in a new direction: the direction of generosity, of modest ownership of possessions, of honoring and seeking the common good.

The image that the writer of Luke brings to mind in this summons to travel in a new direction is the image of building a highway. Luke writes, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make God’s 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.” This is a call to be part of a road construction crew. In order to build a good highway, all the impediments must be overcome—the valleys, the hills, the rough and crooked places. John the Baptist was part of God’s road crew, a prophet who was summoned to remove the impediments standing in the way between the people and God. And the goal was to create a path, a good walkable pathway, so that all people, *all* people could discover the saving way of God, the saving love of God.

There are all kinds of highways we walk upon in our lives. Many such pathways are supported and celebrated by our society. The pathways of success. The pathway of wealth. The path that leads toward big houses and nice possessions. The pathway of looking out for yourself

and those who are part of your tribe. We build these highways for ourselves year by year by year. Or we walk those highways that others have constructed for us. But John the Baptist summons us to take a closer look at those pathways we walk in life and to recognize how many of them reflect the values of Caesar, and Pilate, and Herod, and all those worldly forces of greed and domination. John summons us to walk the only highway that will lead to life—the saving way of God.

And then, then we are summoned to *join* John as part of the road construction crew to “prepare the way of the Lord.” And that will mean the removal of all those impediments that stand between us and God. What might those impediments be? Some of those impediments to the saving way of God reside within us: maybe our anger or fear. Maybe our selfishness or bitterness over some wrong done to us. Maybe our love of possessions. Maybe our addictions or destructive habits. But there are also impediments we put in front of others or which we permit to exist, impediments which keep others from knowing or seeing the saving way of God. Poverty and neglect. Racism and prejudice. Our fear of the stranger.

Think of all the impediments the Christian Church has put before people and the saving way of God when it has excluded people, subjugated people, stolen from people, abused children, and misrepresented the gospel of love so massively that people have turned away from the path of God altogether.

John the Baptist summons us to repent, to change, to turn and walk a different pathway, and then to join him in fixing the road we walk upon so that all people might see the saving way of God.

Let’s rethink the opening passage to Luke’s text. In the twenty-first year of the twenty-first century, when Joe Biden was President of the United States, and Kathy Hochul governor of

New York, and Byron Brown mayor of Buffalo, when Jeff Bezos was CEO of Amazon, and Mark Zuckerberg was CEO of Facebook, and Timothy Cook the CEO of Apple, the word of God came to the people of University Presbyterian Church, calling them, calling us to “prepare the way of the Lord.”