



## *“Crooked Lives and Straight Paths”*

Sermons at Central Park United Methodist Church

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### *Go out into the wilderness!*

There you will find a prophet who will tell you everything about God’s plans. John the Baptist was famous: celebrity famous, word-of-mouth “come and see” famous. When John appeared in the wilderness of Judea preaching a gospel of repentance, word got around quickly. He looked every bit the part of what a prophet should look like, covered in hair and belted at the waist just as Elijah before him had been. (2 Kings 1:8)

He ate strange food, and had a penchant for drama; preaching about the end times and urging everyone- even the religious leaders- to turn their lives back to God. Those that agreed he would baptize there and then, immersing their whole bodies in the river so that they came up sputtering, soaked to the skin and committed to change for the better (for that moment, anyway).

*John had an inkling of what God was about,* sending Messiah to follow behind him. John himself would be judged unworthy even to stoop at the Savior's feet, but long ago God had promised the people, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." (Isaiah 11:1-2) According to John the Baptist, God was about to make good on ancient promises.

Go out into the wilderness! There you will find a man who will tell you everything about yourself. John the Baptist was not concerned with making friends. He was not a people-pleaser; he had no interest in winning over the hearts and minds of the powers-that-be. John spoke truth to this power despite potential personal peril, jeopardizing his own well-being with every utterance against the status quo. Had you met him, he likely would have looked you in the eye and called you out for your sinful ways; only then, uncovered and unmasked under the wilting gaze of God's wild Agent, could you truly see yourself.

*This kind of inward scrutiny is not comfortable,* and chances are you wouldn't appreciate the brass tacks, the dressing down, the stripping away of outward veneer. The face we show to the world is not always consistent with who we really are; what we forget is that God knows us from the inside out. Psalm 139 speaks of God's inescapable knowledge of our innermost thoughts. "O Lord," the psalmist intones, "you have searched me and known me, You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it." (Psalm

139:1-6) John the Baptist's task was to pique the memory of those who came before him to be baptized, that they might recognize their own sin, and repent. Change is impossible if we fail to acknowledge our faults, our shortcomings, and our failings. In the absence of a prophet's assessment, we are left to our own confession. Woe to the one whose self-examination is meaningless; woe to the one whose confession is empty words.

Go out into the wilderness! There you will discern God's plan for you. "Bear fruit worthy of repentance" the prophet proclaimed. (Matt. 3:8) It is not enough to say "I'm sorry;" if the bad behaviors continue. Real change comes from the inside out; from a soiled heart made clean. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right[b] spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." (Psalm 51:10-12)

*Real change cannot happen without the conviction of the Holy Spirit.* Have you ever tried to effect real and lasting change on your own? Have you attempted to lose weight, to quit smoking, to leave off betting on the horses or spending beyond your limits on your own? Will power is fleeting, for it relies exclusively on self-control, which if you're doing those things to begin with you clearly don't have in abundance! Real change, lasting change- the repentance that bears fruit- can only come about through the power of the Holy Spirit.

*John the Baptist practiced a baptism that relied upon the message of repentance,* signaling to the world that a change was gonna come. "I baptize you with water for repentance", John proclaimed, "but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Matt. 3:11) And the Savior Jesus did indeed follow after John, and it is in his name that we have been baptized, by water and the

Spirit. Bathed in the pure water of God's perpetual grace, our sin has been washed away by a Savior we call "Christ." This does not absolve us from the need to confess nor the need to repent; to the contrary, it ought to make us all the more willing to seek his favor at every turn.

For the annual telling of the Baptizer's story reminds us that though the groundwork has been laid, the final battle has not yet played out. Just as God once used John as a voice crying out in the wilderness,

*“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight;”* (Luke 3:4) o now does God use us to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Like John, we know the One who is coming: it is Jesus, Alpha and Omega, first and last; the One who was and is and is to come. (Rev. 1:8)

And just like John, we must go out into the wilderness to tell others about His coming, that they might be prepared to welcome Him too.

Rev. Mary A. Kelly

