

“Mending Our Hearts”

Message by DD Adams

Providence United Methodist Church

2ND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 6, 2015

The gospel lesson for today comes from the third chapter of Luke, verses 1 through 6. I’m reading from the *Common English Bible*. In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet, a voice crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be leveled. The crooked will be made straight and the rough places made smooth. All humanity will see God’s salvation.” This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God.

Luke writes as a historian in the first century. He’s deliberate and detailed in his narrative as usual. In the text that was read, Luke mentions the powerful figures of the day and the VIP’s, and John the Baptist is right smack dab in the middle of a place that’s divided between its politics and religion. Every Advent the Baptist jumps out at us with his to the point and not so subtle announcements. His presence grabs our attention as we imagine him in the wilderness—foul-smelling with a rough exterior, hanging matted dreadlocks, dirty and coarse clothes

expelling dust with every movement he makes, and the low fat diet he's chosen has created a lanky skeletal appearance.

John was not only coarse on the outside, but from the inside came words that cut to the heart. He preached nothing but fire and brimstone and probably scared the bazookas out of everyone. In so many words he was saying, "Shape up, clean up your life or you'll get the axe! Get baptized and get your sins forgiven!" John was preparing a way for the Lord!

We prepare and get ready for Christ's arrival. We reorient our hearts and change its position to a more godly posture as we wait expectantly. I titled this message "Mending Our Hearts." The word *mending* in the Greek is *katartizó*. It's a verb that means to prepare or to bring into its proper condition—whether we're doing so for the first time, or after a lapse of time. We may have drifted and wandered away, but we're called to turn and face God; that's to be our response in the season of Advent.

John was serious about people changing their hearts and lives. It's no surprise he did his preaching around the area of the Dead Sea—also known as the Salt Sea. Its waters are stagnant, and there's no fresh water flowing into it until it finally moves into the sea. Imagine a body of water slow and sluggish in a confined space with no current and usually accompanied with an unpleasant smell.

The stagnancy is the most difficult in my mind. The water isn't fresh or moving much at all this kind of water doesn't change until its mixed with something much larger than itself—the sea. It's as though the water is healed and refreshed through its change in direction and its mixing with the sea.

The phrase that caught my attention was this. John cried out for the ". . . people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins." He's saying it isn't enough to be baptized. When we see our need to change on the inside, it's like a pledge to God that results

in a clear conscience. The apostle Paul would call it circumcision of the heart. We have to engage our heart and will, and do our best to become a more involved disciple of Christ.

Funny how John was in the wilderness. Why not on a street corner? He made the people come to him. In our lives it's a wilderness situation that leads us to change. We initiate a willingness with God to confess our wrongdoing and lose some of our preoccupation with self. We need God to touch our hearts and work a change in us. Whoever would volunteer for a wilderness journey? The heat is turned up all around us, and it's 110 degrees or more. There's nothing to eat and no shelter to hide from the elements. And yet, that's where we change and where we become more willing to be introspective.

It was the spirit of God that led Jesus into the wilderness. It was a time of testing. You know, it's when all those valleys we walk through suddenly get chockfull of challenges. It's where those mountains we looked forward to climbing are now made flat. We all go through it at times in our lives. We don't like it, but it happens. *How* we go through the suffering I guess is the question? Does it produce a positive change in our lives that moves us closer in relationship to God?

We offer our whole being to God; the best we can. And when we do, God builds a path right through the wilderness. We sense a deeper presence of God, and his love and mercy walk along with us. The circumstances of our situation may not change, and probably won't, but the forgiveness, love, and mercy of God transforms us. Our heart changes, and we can see ourselves more clearly. Let's make the most of the time and count our days. Let's appeal to a loving and gracious God, and draw closer during this Advent season of waiting.

Now may the words of Howard Thurman, from *The Mood of Christmas* set our heart on waiting for the Christ child as we pray. "May the sounds of Advent stir a longing in your people, O God. Come again to set us free from the dullness of

routine and the poverty of our imaginations. Break the patterns which bind us to small commitments and to the stale answers we have given to questions of no importance. Let the Advent trumpet blow, let the walls of our defenses crumble, and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, well-lived in the Spirit, and still given to all who know their need and dare receive it. Amen.