

## THE UNRELENTING WORD

Isaiah 40:1-11; Luke 3:1-6  
 A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham  
 First Presbyterian Church  
 New York, New York

Second Sunday of Advent      December 9, 2018

In one of his books, Stephen Covey shared the story of an old seaman, Frank Koch, who remembered being on a battleship during training maneuvers years ago, back before GPS technology came into play. For several days the weather had been heavy, and the fog had greatly limited visibility. Koch remembered being on watch on the bridge one evening shortly before dark, when a lookout on the other wing of the bridge spotted something. “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain inquired. The lookout replied, “Steady, Captain.” The meaning was clear; they were on a collision course. So, the captain called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: We are on a collision course; advise you change course twenty degrees east.” Back came the signal, “Advisable for *you* to change course twenty degrees west.” The captain said to the signalman, “Send, ‘I am a captain; change course twenty degrees east.’” “‘I’m a seaman second class,’” came the reply. “You still had better change course twenty degrees west.”

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send, ‘I’m a battleship. Change course twenty degrees east immediately.’” Back came the flashing light, “‘I’m a lighthouse; advise that you change course.’” Said Koch, “*We* changed course.”<sup>1</sup>

Once again on the Second Sunday of Advent we encounter John the Baptist and his uncompromising call to change course. He shows up every year on this Sunday, making his unwelcome appearance. A pastor friend described him as “the crazy uncle who crashes the family Christmas dinner and overstays his welcome by at least a week.”<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor goes further; she called John “the Doberman pinscher of the gospel... this big old dog with a spiky collar” who grabs us by the ankle in the dark when our defenses are down and our eyes are [already] set on the starlit stable.<sup>3</sup>

Each Gospel has a slightly different take on John, adding to our portrait of this prophet who came to prepare the way for Jesus. In Luke’s case, there seems to be a special interest in placing John in his historical context. Luke doesn’t measure time from the advent of Jesus. Instead, he counts years from the advent of Tiberius as emperor. It was, Luke tells us, in the fifteenth year of that Caesar’s reign that “the word of God came,” in those days when Pontius Pilate was governor up in Jerusalem, the Herod boys were down in Galilee, and Lysanias was

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York, Fireside Books, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Clayton, in a paper on this text presented to the January 2012 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Decatur, Georgia.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “A Cure for Despair,” *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 1997, 16, as cited by Clayton.

stuck in Abilene, better known to us as the Bekka Valley. Annas and Caiaphas were in their appointed places, providing the glue for Rome's social engineers.

Luke, in a chronicle replete with these people and places, seems to be saying that when "the Word of God came" it *really* came. It came all the way down into *this* world; ... into our world, the world of political, economic and religious power, the world of the Caesars.<sup>4</sup>

But he also seems to say something else. He seems to anticipate all the political and religious forces that will seek to thwart the spread of the Gospel. In his telling of John's story those forces will play out their power. Jesus will appear before the chief priests and the scribes, before Pilate and Herod. Yet, as Christine Chakoian says, "even piled together, name upon name upon name, all the king's horses and all the king's men can't compete with God."<sup>5</sup>

So, although the focus in these verses is upon John the Baptist, the force at play in these verses is God... as the unrelenting "word of God" comes to John. Driven by that Word, John "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." His voice was like that described by the prophet Isaiah, a voice etched into our musical memory last Sunday by the air for tenor of Handel's *Messiah*:

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be [exalted], 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."

Luke begins his description of John with historical references to the emperor Tiberius and his contemporaries and concludes it with a reference to Isaiah. He begins with socio-political realities and concludes with the language of redemption. To understand John, Luke seems to say, one must understand both Tiberius and Isaiah.<sup>6</sup> More than that, John's *message* about the baptism of repentance is intricately intertwined with Isaiah's words. Robert Tannehill says,

The images of road-building in Isaiah become images of repentance. Height and depth are to be leveled; the crooked and rough are to be made straight and smooth. This drastic transformation of a terrain that obstructs travel becomes a symbol of the repentance that the Lord's coming requires.<sup>7</sup>

True repentance demands such a leveling. No one has or deserves a higher status than another, whether by birthright or by self-righteousness. The very heights to which we sometimes aspire often turn out to be the rocks and crags that block our pathway to God. In Luke's Gospel and within God's economy, the lowly are always the ones who get lifted up.

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<sup>4</sup> James Kay, "Ready for Prime Time (Luke 3:1-6)," *Christian Century*, Nov. 19-26, 1997, 1067.

<sup>5</sup> Christine Chakoian, in a paper presented to the January, 2003 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997, 166, as cited by Chakoian.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, Vol. I, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986, 48. Cited by Chakoian.

The repentance to which John calls people is a repentance rooted in the prophetic vision of the great reversal and the great leveling. The prophets challenged human security and human complacency and said, “Advise you change course!” Those who are rich and powerful and who have found their consolation in the rewards of this life are cast down and lowered, while those normally deemed unworthy or despised find themselves accepted by God... raised up, as it were. Such leveling is part and parcel of the message of the prophets, and the message John embraces in preparing the way for Jesus, and the message Jesus himself proclaims.<sup>8</sup> Hard as those words may be for us, we resist them at our peril. Chris Chakoian has folks like us in mind when she says,

We would do well to see ourselves in those whom all the prophets warn: those who ... place ourselves on the pedestals of righteousness; those who by our own pridefulness don't even recognize the wilderness when we're in it; those who by our [investments] and ... pension funds and ... even coffee drinking defraud the poor without even thinking of it. We would do well [in short] to begin by confessing our own sinfulness.

[Still, she says], the bringing down of the high and the lifting up of the low are not some Marxist plot, but the good news of the Gospel.... As Luke Johnson [notes], “Human values are reversed by God not for the destruction of the wicked but for the saving of the lost.” Even ... those of us who didn't even know we had veered off the path.<sup>9</sup>

Reading about repentance and confession this week, I came across an article from an old *New York Times Magazine* from years ago – the reflections of Lorenzo Albacate, a Catholic priest and theologian from Yonkers, about his experience hearing confession. Of course, confession in the Catholic Church is more individually focused than in our Reformed context. But bear with me, for there is something important in what Fr. Albacate said:

The first time I heard confession was a couple of weeks after my ordination in 1973, at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, D.C, where John F. Kennedy's requiem Mass was celebrated. The penitent was a tourist who had wandered in almost by accident. “I was on my way to McDonald's,” he said, “but I saw the church and remembered Kennedy's funeral – then I noticed the little green light in the confessional, so I came in. I'm not really sure what I want.”

“Well,” I replied, “I hope you don't want a Big Mac with fries...”

He chuckled, then said, “Look, Father, it's been a long, long time. I'm going to tell you things you have never heard in confession before.”

“That's not too difficult,” I said. “This is my first confession. Anything you say will be a shock to me.” He started to laugh, hard. Those in line fled to the other confession line.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke: Sacra Pagina*, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 1991, as cited by Chakoian.

<sup>9</sup> Chakoian.

I wasn't taking the occasion lightly. The mystical tradition speaks of something called giddiness before the sacred, a way of expressing the infinite disproportion between you and the mystery with which, somehow, you have become involved. I was simply feeling the infinite disproportion of it all.

Then he wrote,

Many think of confession as a frightening exposure of the deepest self. The [priest] looks into the darkest regions of the human psyche, uncovering the most embarrassing secrets – not only what you have actually done, but also what you have wanted to do. (Priest: “Did you entertain any impure thoughts? Honest penitent: “No, Father, they entertained me.”) And so, one does everything possible to seek refuge in euphemisms and abstractions, and above all, to avoid being heard by those waiting outside the confessional.

Albacate's point was that most of us are not fully honest in confession, in confronting our own lives and changing course the way the prophets urged. He continued:

Eventually [in the Catholic Church], those in charge changed the rite of confession. They added Scripture readings, encouraged a conversational style and introduced “reconciliation rooms” that resembled a... psychologist's office.... In truth, however, nothing in our vocation qualified us as therapists.

On the day of my ordination [he wrote], my own mother, suitably proud, taught me that lesson. “I used to think priests knew everything,” she told me. “Now I worry, because you are a priest, and you don't know anything.”

Since then I have come to know [at least] this: Confession is not therapy, nor is it moral accounting. At its best, it is the affirmation that the ultimate truth of our interior life is our absolute poverty, our radical dependence, our unquenchable thirst, our desperate need to be loved. As St. Augustine knew so well, confession is ultimately about praise.<sup>10</sup>

That's it, I think. That is what all the prophetic talk about reversal and leveling is all about. It's what John the Baptist was all about. That's what this Sunday is all about. It is *all* ultimately about praise. But it is also good to note that along its way to praise, confession is also about truth-telling. As Chakoian says, “Repentance ... and confession, are ultimately levelers – not because of some holy magic they perform, but because of the truth they reveal. The truth about us, and about our world, and about our utter dependence on God.”

Of course, leveling is not the last word. The leveling Isaiah described – and John proclaimed – is the penultimate. The ultimate – the final word – is a promise, articulated by Isaiah and proclaimed by John: All flesh shall see the salvation of God.

“He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” What kind of baptism? Not one that celebrates our keen eloquence or our best intentions. Not one that underscores our own faithfulness or insights. The baptism John

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<sup>10</sup> Fr. Lorenzo Albacate, *New York Times Magazine*, May 7, 2000. Cited by Chakoian.

proclaimed is baptism for repentance,<sup>11</sup> for changing course, the baptism that confronts us with the truth about ourselves, but then embraces that truth within the larger truth about God... the truth that, in the end, has the power to set us free.

And not just us, but also Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Lysanias, and all those who bear their mantles in our day. All flesh is going to see the salvation of God. *All flesh*, says Luke. And where is such salvation lodged? In the emperor? No. In Pilate? Not a chance. In Trump or Pelosi or Putin or Macron or Merkel or Netanyahu? No. Salvation is lodged in the One made known to us by John the Baptist.<sup>12</sup> And we all know His name. His name is life.

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<sup>11</sup> Chakoian.

<sup>12</sup> Paraphrasing Thomas G. Long, in comments made to the January 2003 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville.