

All Flesh Shall See

*A sermon preached on Luke 3:1-6 on Sunday, December 8, 2024,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*
I.

Just a few weeks ago, the world lost one of the greats: Tony Campolo – pastor, writer, storyteller to all. Among his many stories was one I’ve told you before about a man named Joe. He was a classic drunk, “a dirty wino,” in the words of those who knew him, who was stuck in the cycle of misery in New York City where he lived on the streets. No home, no job, no hope, no peace ... until his miraculous conversion one day at the Bowery Mission¹, a community serving hungry and homeless New Yorkers like Joe.

On that day, everything changed. Joe became the definition of caring, more than anyone had ever known. His days and nights were spent at the Mission, doing any task, however menial, that needed to be done. Nothing was beneath him. Not cleaning the vomit after sick alcoholics had come through, or scrubbing the toilets after men had left it filthy. Nothing. Joe did it all, and with a smile on his face and a heart full of gratitude for the chance to help and give back.

One night, the director of the Bowery Mission was giving his usual evangelistic message in the chapel for the seemingly-uninterested men gathered there, when one of the guys stood up, walked quickly down the aisle to the altar, knelt to pray, and cried out to God to help him change. The man kept shouting, “Oh God! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!” The director of the Mission leaned over and said to the man, “Son, I

¹ <https://www.bowery.org/about-us/>

think it would be better if you prayed, ‘Make me like Jesus.’” The man looked up at the director, confused, and asked, “Is he like Joe?”²

II.

We meet another Joe today in our Advent preparations, one who points us to Jesus. His name was John. John the Baptist as history calls him. Wild haired eater of locusts and honey. Son of Zechariah. Unruly wilderness messenger with Isaiah on his lips and relentless good news in his heart.

Last Sunday, our Advent path to the manger began at the end – near the end of Jesus’s life, hearing his call to redemption even as the apocalypse, the revealing, is drawing near. This Sunday, we’re working our way backward to the manger, as we hear of John the Baptist who points the way to Jesus as Jesus’s ministry begins.

Luke’s telling of this story insisted on context. He wanted to be sure we knew what was happening. These first verses in our passage today feel to me like when you start a movie and something like “Paris, 1942” flashes on the screen to situate you. Here, Luke gives us eight ways in political and regional life to locate John and therefore Jesus. It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, Pontius Pilate governor of Judea, Herod ruler of Galilee, Herod’s brother Philip ruler of Ituraea and Trachonitis, Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphus. Then and there, the word of God – *the word of God!* – came to John in the wilderness. Luke doesn’t just date and locate the gospel, but rather he communicates that the gospel is inherently local, particular, specific. It’s a theological claim, not just a

² Tony Campolo, *Everything You Heard is Wrong*, shared by my pastor peer learning group in preacher camp many years ago.

historical one. God entered into a specific time and place, with certain political leaders and a distinct setting.

III.

And what was that word that John went around repeating? *Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. It gives us a clue for the coming Savior he called us to look for. Words like “baptism,” “forgiveness,” and “sins” might be words that are more familiar to you, straightforward and clear. But like “apocalypse” and “redemption” last week, “repentance” might just be one of those well-worn church words you’ve heard throughout your life that vaguely makes you feel bad about yourself. “I’m probably doing something wrong,” you acknowledge, “and I should repent.”

Despite our assumptions, the original meaning of the word translated here in English as “repent” didn’t mean “to feel sorry for,” or “to regret.” Rather “repentance” in its truest form is translated from the Greek word, *metanoia*. Which means, most literally, a “turning,” a “change of one’s mind and heart and life.” We’re not just talking some minor adjustments here or a tune up over there; we’re talking about a complete 180. A u-turn in your living. Repentance means leaving behind what was and embracing what could be, a whole-self reorientation toward God. Repentance is not about guilt or shame, but rather stepping off the daily treadmill of your life, changing direction, and committing to live differently. “Repentance is a realization,” Eugene Peterson says, “that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts.”³ Some scholars call “repentance” a returning home to

³ Eugene Peterson, *Run With the Horses*.

God.⁴ So if one repents, in John's perspective, one turns, one changes from the inside out, one returns to the deepest and truest home of our being. The redemption or salvation that we talked about last week? That's God's work. Repentance is our work.

I want to spend some time today on this point about repentance in this first and seemingly only sermon of John the Baptist. For taking our cue from Luke's telling of this story – local, specific, particular – we must consider what repentance looks like for Christians living in the United States of America in 2024 – local, specific, particular for us too.

Let's start by considering what orients us to the world, so we can consider what a change or turn within it might be. Let me ask you – what orients you to the world? You might think of your family or friends, the neighborhood or town where you grew up, the type of work you do. You might think of your race or ethnicity, your sexual orientation or gender identity. You might think of education (formal or informal), wealth or lack thereof, a medical condition or social reality that shapes your days. You might think of your faith. All of these are shapers of identity, but as social psychologists tell us these days, the strongest attachment that shapes our identity in the Year of our Lord 2024 is our political party.⁵ Whew. The strength of that partisan bond, they say, is stronger than any other – than race, ethnicity, religion, or any of the rest – and yet this commitment of our identity is causing unprecedented division, in part because we think what we believe about how our common life is shaped (aka politics) communicates not just a belief in what we *do*, but a belief in who we *are*.

⁴ Leonard Sweet & Frank Viola, *Jesus Speaks*.

⁵ <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2017/08/political-party-identities-stronger-race-religion>

So with that framework in mind, now think with me for a minute about how a change of mind or a change of heart is perceived in our common, political life together. This may seem rather innocuous when we're talking about your opinion on Beyonce or Taylor Swift, or if eggnog is better with or without the bourbon. But it gets harder when we wade into that political space, especially when we consider how our political leaders might express a change of thought. "The other guy's a flip-flopper," politicians have said for decades when another one changes their mind: on taxes, on a war, on rights, you name it. The other guy being a flip-flopper, of being for something before being against it, has cost a handful of future presidents their election, and millions of regular folks like us the trust in their leaders to say what they mean and mean what they say – all the time, not just when it's politically convenient. *Can we trust them?*, we wonder. *Where's their integrity?*, we ask. *Who even are they?* So our beliefs harden. They calcify. They pull us apart and anchor us down. And I have to believe that this lack of changing one's mind in political spaces is directly tied to the hold political spaces have on our identity, our sense of belonging and location in the world.

Maybe it's only in politics that a turn, a change of mind, a flip flop is negative. It makes me think of that quote from humorist Robert Benchley, who said, "there are two kinds of people: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't."⁶ Because in most other spheres, it would be ludicrous, irrational – dare I say *dangerous!* – not to change as new facts come to light. Imagine a scientist refusing to adapt long-held practices around public health "because we've always done it that way," or a pediatrician balking at a different way to encourage new parents about their

⁶ Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, p165.

new babies when new data gives a new way to understand sleeping, feeding, thriving. No way. It would be malpractice NOT to change, right?

So what is it? What is it about our politics, how we organize our common life together, that hardens us and defines us? Surely the vast unwillingness among humans to admit wrongdoing, to release opinions that no longer serve us, to tie our identity to our beliefs... surely all of this creates the climate in which – at least in our country – people do not understand each other. It's too simplistic to say we're divided or polarized, though this is true. It's more accurate to say that no matter what position we hold on the proverbial other guy, other position, other thought, we are baffled by each other, no matter which half of the political space we claim. We are utterly bewildered that there are people in this world – in our country! Our neighborhood! Our friend group! Our family! Our church! – who can see and hear and comprehend the state of things and have a completely opposite perspective of its causes and effects. At best, we're perplexed. At worst, we're disgusted, contemptuous, repulsed – and not just by the idea we don't like, but by the person who holds it. "This isn't just what they believe," we say, "it's who they are." And we wonder then why it's hard for any of us to change.

IV.

When the word of God comes to John, son of Zechariah, John calls all the people then and forever more to turn in preparation for Jesus. "Repent?" we ask back to John. How about we just veer a little bit in a few areas? Maybe I could just turn on my turn signal a bit? Could I interest you in a bend or a curve? I could use some veering in my diet over here or my spending habits over there – I do have an awful lot of Amazon packages showing up at my door this time of year – so how's that, John the Baptist? Does that count? If

you need names of people who DO need to repent, or have a whole turning, boy I could give them to you. But *I* don't need that! I don't need a whole turning! That would be foolish, because my opinions, my beliefs, my actions reflect my commitments to our life together! Turning from those means giving up things that matter. Turning from those means I won't even know what to think or what to do. Turning from those means I won't even know who I am.

And yet, John keeps proclaiming. Repentance is good news, he seems to say. Forgiveness and mercy and compassion and grace come next, for all of us, no matter what we think or do. Because of who we are. Because of who we are as God's beloved children. And because of who God is. Because our God is so present, that God insists on coming close, getting local, specific, particular, and showing up. Our God is so compassionate, that God gives us time and time again to return, to change, to make the path clear. Our God is so relentless, that God's forgiveness is available to all of God's children always.

So in the year of our Lord two thousand and twenty four, when Joe Biden concludes his presidency of the United States and Donald Trump prepares to start again, the year the waters rose in North Carolina and the kids are still hungry in Winston-Salem, during the high priesthood of economic disparity and brittle anger and screen addiction, the word of God comes yet again to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. In the wilderness, in our wilderness, the prophet calls us to repent, to turn away from the life of certainty, of animosity, of fear, of boasting, of letting our beliefs define us and letting those same beliefs divide us. To turn away from thinking any ounce of our living is too precious, too formed that Jesus can't come in and wholly renew us from the inside out. To let go of even our tightest grasp so we can

live open-handed lives. Turned-around lives. Lives that prepare the way for the Messiah. That fill the valleys and lower the mountains. That make the crooked paths straight and the rough ways smooth. Lives and paths prepared not just for all creation to seek God, but for God to seek us. “And then,” John says, “then all flesh shall see – *all flesh shall see!* – the liberating, redeeming, saving power of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

V.

Let me close with a familiar story of the power of a turned-around life. It was on one quiet morning in 1888 when Alfred Nobel awoke and read his own obituary. Nobel, you see, was the inventor of dynamite, who spent his whole life amassing wealth from weapons of mass destruction. The paper called him “the dynamite king,” proclaiming widely: “Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday. The merchant of death is dead!” The problem, of course, is that this French newspaper mistook Alfred’s brother’s death for his own. A simple mistake of a reporter confusing the names of Alfred and Ludvig shook Alfred to his core. “Is that all I am?” he asked himself, “is the purpose of my life merely to be known as ‘the dynamite king’? What about all the ways I’ve tried to bring people together across barriers and borders, or the other inventions to spur on humanity’s creativity? In the end, *is that all I am* – the merchant of death? Is that how I’ll be remembered?”

This moment of truth for Alfred Nobel changed his life. He wanted to make clear to the world the values and intent and purpose of his life. So in his last will and testament, Alfred Nobel left his legacy to be named the Nobel Peace Prize, the most valued award across the world for those who have

done the most for the cause of peace. At the end of his life, Alfred Nobel returned. The rough places were made plain.⁷

Friends, as we prepare our lives for Christ to be born again, let's live open-hearted lives. Let's receive the gift of repentance, of returning again and again to the God who makes all things new! Amen!

⁷ Story as told by Peter Rhea Jones in his book *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, p156; quoting the original source "Reading Your Own Obituary," by Robert Raines.