



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: December 6, 2009**

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#### **Preparing the Way, Robert B. Culp**

Luke 3:1-6

The season of Advent is a time of preparation for most of us. There are presents to be bought and wrapped, cards and personal notes to be written and sent, festive gatherings to plan and attend. It is a season of remembrance and reunion, a time when we see and hear from people outside our everyday comings and goings. Children come home from school, parents anticipate holiday visits, old friends stop by or call to say “Hello,” and “Merry Christmas,” and “Happy New Year.”

It is a unique season of homecoming, which means that there is work to be done on the home front. For before we start trimming the Christmas tree and setting in place all our colorful decorations and before we begin to bake all our favorite cookies and tasty treats, we must first do some serious housecleaning – rounding up all the dust bunnies beneath the beds and removing the spider webs from the Ficus tree, wiping clean the paw prints on the sliding glass doors, sorting through all the stuff that can accumulate on shelves and tables, and probably making more than a few trips to the recycling bins at Holly Hill.

It is a lot of work! But when all this work is finished, the home not only looks better, but it feels better too. It seems like our home has more room in it, partly because we’ve tossed out all the useless stuff and put the good stuff where we can find it ... but mostly because we have paid attention to the rooms in which we live. We’ve given them a critical eye and our loving care, and in return our home almost seems to purr with satisfaction and contentment, becoming a place we are glad to welcome family and guests.

If you know what I mean, then you know what John the Baptist means as well, because he is pretty much saying the same thing in our lesson from Luke this morning, except the house that he’s talking about is the house of our selves – our souls and bodies. It is as if he is saying: “Vacuum out your hearts, dust off your minds, and wash the windows through which you have been perceiving your God, and straighten out your lives. Because God is on his way into the

world and into your lives. So get yourselves ready and prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare a place that is ready to receive him, and one in which you are glad to welcome him.”

Now, when John first preached this message out in the wilderness by the River Jordan, most of his hearers knew what he was talking about. For it was the custom in those days for rulers to send couriers ahead of them along their travels – to check out the roads and warn the locals to get to work, smoothing out the ruts and patching all the potholes, because the king was on his way. The only problem was that John was not really sure who was on his way, or what direction he would be coming from. The only thing he knew for sure was that he was coming from God, and that the accommodations he preferred were the lives and hearts of those he met along the way.

Sight unseen, John consented to be God’s messenger, and he warned everyone who would listen to clean house, to pave roads, and to prepare the way of the Lord. It was an exciting and joyful message – that the Lord was coming to be among his people, that everyone was going to get a chance to see him, and that God was about to be present to his people – not as a pillar of fire or as a still small voice, but as a flesh-and-blood savior.

As we have encountered John in past years, though, we know that he cast his message in fiery language that offended more than a few in the religious community and establishment. “Repent and be baptized! Change your ways, and let me wash you off so that the outside of you matches the inside of you, which has been wiped clean of sin. Repent!” That’s what he said, and you can guess that his hearers felt about the same way we do when we hear that word. The very sound of it conjures up revival tents, Elmer Gantry, and all those billboards along the back roads of the South, to which I alluded last Sunday.

So ... what happened to the joy and gladness of a warm homecoming? Where did the good news go? Such words of repentance sound more like a wake than a celebration, for those of us who may have been on our tip-toes, craning our necks to catch a glimpse of the coming Lord, have now become preoccupied with our sins and have the idea somehow that what the Lord most wants to hear from us is how sorry we are and how we’ll try to do better from now on. As one commentator puts it, “We have gotten repentance all mixed up with feelings of remorse, and we now dread the holy visitor whom we had set out to welcome.”

Repentance, though, is not focused upon our feeling sorry about ourselves or for ourselves. It is not a matter of our making a list of all the things we wished we had not done and feeling badly about them, as if we could dilute them with our regrets. Repentance is not about wishing that we were better persons or keeping track of all our faults and foibles, as if God might be persuaded to overlook them if only we could convince God that we are really, really, really sorry. In the end, repentance is not deciding to be nicer, or more generous, or more spiritual, for it really is not something that we control. Rather, repentance is more something that

happens to us than something we decide or do on our own.

For example, repentance is when you come home from a camping trip where you had carried everything you needed on your back, or from an outing to East Harlem or Port Chester to serve in a soup kitchen or to assist in one of the homeless shelters – repentance is that moment when you walk through the front door of your house and everything looks different to you. Your living room is like a museum, filled with such lovely and unnecessary things. Your kitchen overwhelms you with its multiple sets of dishes and food enough for weeks. Your closet is so full of clothes that you wonder how you ever decided you needed them all. You are as rich as Bill and Melinda Gates, and you did not even know it. You have so much that you start plotting how you can give it away.

Or repentance is when you wake up in the middle of the night with a pain, or feeling a lump, or experiencing a fever ... and while you lie there wondering whether it is something or nothing, your life begins to look different to you. You begin to think about the people in your life whom you love and who love you, and to dream about the things you meant to do as soon as you cleared the deck and made time. And whether you have ten days to live or ten thousand, you decide to take the time and make everything count.

Or repentance is when you have your life all set – your career established, your savings plan secure, your daily routine streamlined for maximum comfort and efficiency ... and someone else comes into your life: an elderly parent, a sick friend, a spouse who is hurting, a child or grandchild in desperate need. In the twinkling of an eye, everything looks different, as one way of life suddenly dissolves right before your eyes and another takes its place ... a life in which you are intimately involved with another human being. Whether you are loving it or hating it, you have the sneaking suspicion that this is the reason you were born, and that it is the only thing in the world worth doing right now.

I read a story recently about a soldier named Eric who had served a number of tours of duty in Iraq and was assigned stateside responsibilities at a military base. The teller of this story was a member of a think tank associated with a major university who had been invited to speak at this military base a couple of years ago about this time of the year. It so happened that Eric had been assigned to be his official escort, meeting him at the airport. After they introduced themselves to each other, they headed toward the baggage claim.

All the way down the concourse, this university speaker said, Eric kept disappearing – once to assist an elderly woman whose suitcase had fallen open, once to lift up two toddlers where they could see Santa Claus, and again to give directions to someone whose face revealed she was desperately lost and running late. Each time, he came back with a big smile on his face and picked up the conversation where he had left off ... leaving the university speaker somewhat confused as to what he was all about.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked Eric when he came back the third time. “Do what?” Eric replied. “Where did you learn to live like that?” “Oh,” Eric said, “during my time in Iraq, I guess.” And over the course of their car trip back to the base, Eric told the speaker about his tours of duty in Iraq, and how it was his job to clear mine fields and look for roadside IED’s ... and how he watched more than a few of his fellow soldiers lose their limbs and lives right before his eyes. “I learned to live between the steps,” he said. “I never knew whether the next step would be my last, so I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it back down again. Every step I took, it was a whole new world, and I guess I’ve been that way ever since.”

You see, repentance is a complete turnabout, a change in course, a change of heart and mind and life. Repentance is so busy redeeming the present moment and filling it with love that you have no time to apologize for the past. Repentance is a matter of being grasped by God, of being picked up and put down again so that everything looks different, so that you lose your old bearings and are offered a new direction instead. Somehow, God directs this process in very gracious and powerful ways, while our role is simply to have the good sense to say “Thank you” (instead of “No” or “Not yet”) and to learn how to steer by those new lights (instead of stubbornly resisting and returning to our old, familiar ways.)

But we need to remember in all this that repentance is not something that happens only once. Because life, as you well know, is full of turning points, some of them large, and some quite small – moments when we are offered a new way of looking at things, a new place to stand, a new direction for our lives. Such moments can be exciting, disorienting, liberating, frightening ... and that can make them easy to discount. After the storm is over and the fever has passed and the baby is potty-trained, and the warring conflict is over, it is easy to forget how everything looked for a while ... how changed, how brand new and wide open and uncharted it all seemed ... and indeed, was.

You see, the blessing of these days of Advent’s preparation is that we are being told that the Lord is coming, and that the Lord has many more such moments up his sleeve than we can possibly count or even imagine. John encourages us to repent, to change. But this is not a message of judgment. Rather, it is a message of extraordinary grace, for it’s an invitation for us to be lifted up and turned around so that we may face the One whose name is love, and who seeks entrance into our hearts.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, help us prepare a way for you, and make a straight path. Assist us in the difficult but redemptive work of cleaning the house of our heart, and sweeping the front steps to our soul. And as we do so, may we understand that in so doing it is your transforming Spirit at work in each one of us and in all of us, making all things new, and preparing in us a home you can call your very own. In Jesus’ name. Amen.