

**The Second Sunday of Advent, December 6, 2009, James Livingston, Seminarian
Luke 3:1-6**

O Lord, *open* Thou my *lips*. And my mouth shall show forth Thy praise. Amen.

Sisters and brothers, come with me on a journey. Let us put away the concerns of our daily toil. Forget the chores we set for ourselves, the tasks that make us successful and rich, for today is like no other. Come with me instead, as we wander out from our homes, away from the noise of the city, far from the markets and tradesmen. For the word of God has come upon a prophet, the Good News of John, baptizing in the River Jordan, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. For us this will be the beginning of a new life, a chance to turn away from our selfishness, our wickedness, our desires that distance us from God and His love for us. The Jordan is not so distant as to make the journey an intolerable inconvenience. Come, we shall walk it together. Gather your staff, should you require it, and tighten the strap of your sandals. Besides, this morning witnesses to the beauty of God's creation today, does it not?

What better way to praise the Lord of all creation than to pay attention to that sunrise, brilliant and golden only just free of the horizon. The warmth on the wind mixes with the scent of the desert, and it caresses the sands that shifts in such vivid patterns, as if the water and earth were the same. Look, there he is! John, a man removed from our noisy city streets living in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey. Let us draw closer, to hear his Good News, for the word of God has come to John, way out here in the wilderness. It is an exciting time! His words are alive, they sound filled with the power of the heavenly courts, like rows of trumpets of angels. He tells us that the Lord is coming, that we must prepare a way for him, for his arrival, straightening the crooked road, smoothing the rough ways. We must prepare ourselves as well, for you and I, we are creatures making our way in the world by crooked and rough means. John's message is that forgiveness from God is here for the taking, that it may grace us, and indeed, this is fabulous news!

Truly it is a great day that we can know in our hearts the love of God for us! No brother, we have not earned it by sending up sacrifices, nor have we traded for it with promises through prayer. And yet, we have received it, we have grasped it with both hands, we have felt the joy that comes with knowing that we have been washed clean by God! What do we do with such a weighty gift!? John has spoken to us the answer. We must repent, but what a glorious moment it is, and the message of repentance has never sounded so sweet. The word of God has come to John, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. This is indeed Good News!

Yes sister, I agree with you that, at first glance, John's message of repentance sounds so guilt-laden, but is this what he is really saying? I too hear his words and John sounds like he is shaking an angry finger at us, that our sinfulness must be dealt with *before* God will even consider pardoning our offenses. But in truth, what I hear is John's full message as it comes to us with energy, urgency, with a zeal and fervor that we might truly comprehend that the Lord is coming now. Yes, the Lord is coming, about to arrive any minute to stand on the threshold of our homes, our inner sanctum, looking deep within to check up on us. I worry about what the Lord might see. The books on the shelf, have I straightened them up enough? Should I smooth out the fringes in the rug one more time? Do you think He will notice the cobwebs I didn't have time to get to, barely noticeable in the corner? Heh, truly though, I must not fool myself, for I know that what the Lord seeks lies not in the house I abide in, but the house that abides within me. Perhaps I should be less concerned with cleaning the house, and more about cleaning up my ways, my relationship with God. The cleanliness of my thoughts, words, and deeds are an open book to He that comes.

And the Lord IS coming! He draws nearer every minute. Soon I will meet the Messiah, my Creator and Redeemer. I will see Him, face to face, as I truly am, as He sees me, exposed. When I think on it brother, I fret for it makes me want to hide, something deep within that reminds me that I have strayed from the Lord's way like a lost sheep, that I have erred. Ahh, so this is why John preaches repentance to us! Repentance, yes, but God has made us worthy through His grace and mercy already. We are given this gift not through our deserving, through no merit of our own. Instead, God handed His pardon to us on a silver platter, and our only response is to accept His forgiveness humbly. It is right that we should bow down before the Lord and His precious gift, low and deep, hoping to relay

some small sense of our immense gratitude. At any other time, we might conduct ourselves as upright and proud, like majestic mountains, monarchs, towering high above all else, overseeing a vast expanse of fields. But the Lord of all creation is before us and He comes bearing the jewel of eternal life. This is the Good News from John that we might prepare ourselves for the Lord's coming through a baptism of repentance as a response to His mercy upon us.

Truly, do we not wish to make ourselves ready for the Lord's arrival? The prophets before John have spoken similar messages; repent, repent, repent. But, this time is different, brothers and sisters. This time we are called to respond in due manner to the gift of mercy from the Lord our God. Ours is the reaction to His gift. We must search diligently within ourselves, taking a hard look in the mirror to find the crooked ways inside of us, the rough edges, the hills too lofty, and the valleys too low, and attend to them with the same zeal and fervor of John's message before us.

John's cry comes from the prophet Isaiah. It is a call to repent, the heralded cry for the Messiah, Emmanuel, the King of Kings, the one who will deliver unto us the salvation of God! Again, our most proper response is to repent, for it is good to do. I agree, brother, repentance is not an easy task for any of us, it challenges us to turn to God from sin. A change of heart and mind that for us demands that we transform our lives, focusing our attention on God and what He desires for us, not what we have valued but what God values. And yes, you are right, sister, such an enormous task *would* be better approached with some practical advice at hand, something specific to our condition, something that speaks directly to us and guides us, that we might hammer out the details of this repentance. If we wait a bit longer and listen to John, he may still show us the way. I still think he has more to tell us. Let us focus our attention on John's words, God's message, our Good News. For now, though, John speaks only as in a poem, and oh what news it is! We must prepare the way for the Lord, prepare ourselves from without and from within. The Lord is coming at this very hour!

This gift from the Lord, the forgiveness of sins, can we even conceive of something so immense? Perhaps we should prepare a gift in return, some small token of our appreciation? Perhaps we could offer to seek out a collection from the townsfolk, send a young boy with baskets to be filled with our finest wares, maybe draw up the treasure from our deepest coffers as a sign to almighty God that we are truly thankful. No. Earthly goods for eternal life? The Lord's forgiveness is too great for repayment, His love too broad, too high. Never in our combined lifetimes could we gather enough to compare to such. Humbling, is it not? It is to me, brothers and sisters. If I were a mountain, I too would make myself low before He who comes.

John's message of repentance is Good News! We have been given the time to attend to those facets of our lives that require attention, scrutiny, amendment, and all to the honor of the Lord who comes soon. So very soon! It is an exciting time. And in all this I must remember the most amazing promise of all; that all flesh shall see the salvation of God! All flesh shall see the salvation of God! Amen!