

The Non-profit Prophet

[Texts - Mark 1:1-8]

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John the Baptist is no-frills kind of guy. With his camel hair clothing and his locust-and-wild-honey diet, this plain-spoken prophet declares a hard-hitting message of *repentance*. He is “preparing the way of the Lord”, and if anyone gets in his way, they’d better be prepared to be pulverized by his powerful prophetic proclamation. John’s rough and fiery manner may be why there are preachers today who still deliver a fire-and brimstone, turn-or burn kind of message.

The main problem with this kind of harsh approach to “Clearing the Way for Christ” is that those who employ such methods often end-up hindering the very thing they claim to promote. Even though John the Baptist and many of the prophets of old declare a decisive message of *repentance*, they never declare that it’s the Holy One’s desire to knock-down or annihilate those who are already battered and beaten. Now, the prophets do have some scathing words for those who are self-righteously judgmental of others; as well as for those who use their power or position to abuse, attack, or take advantage of others. But a genuine Prophet of God - first and foremost - seeks justice for the oppressed, shows mercy to the downtrodden, and stands in solidarity with those vulnerable people who most need Divine help, comfort and hope.

By all accounts, John the Baptist *is* a formidable and fiery figure. Yet even rough and rugged John doesn’t go out of his way to attack people with his message of repentance. To the contrary, people actually come looking for him. All kinds of people - from Jerusalem to the Judean countryside - are drawn to this impressive and imposing prophet. They go into the wilderness to receive a baptismal cleansing, and to soak-in John’s message of repentance and forgiveness, redemption and *hope!* John the Baptist “Prepares the Way of the Lord” by calling all those who need to, to turn-away from their unhealthy and

destructive ways. And then, he points them toward the Messiah [or in Greek, the *Christ*] - God's Anointed One.

Jesus the Christ, the One to whom John points, comes to turn this world's understanding of power, privilege, and prestige completely upside-down. As the Messiah, Jesus establishes his Lordship, by humbly serving others. He lifts-up the lowly and champions the oppressed; he touches society's "untouchable" lepers, with compassion and healing; he even washes the feet of his followers - including those who will betray, deny, and desert him. And when presented with the opportunity to back-away from his message of inclusive love and grace - and save his own skin - Jesus chooses to stand in solidarity with his flawed and fragile sisters and brothers. He trusts that his Divine, Life-giving Source will honor that choice, and will ultimately transform his death into a gateway to new and everlasting life. *This is "The Way of the Lord!"* And it's the pathway to full and meaningful Life, which you and I are now called to follow.

In order for us to do so, repentance may well be needed - not only by those whose lives are obviously on the wrong track, but also by those of us who think that our religious purity and piety puts us above others. The call to *repent* - to make a radical change in the way we approach Life - is still an extremely viable and valuable message, in spite of how that word has been misused as a Biblical battering ram. To *re-pent* simply means to "turn around" - to change our direction, whenever we recognize that our behaviors, our priorities, or our lives are off-target from that which is good and true, loving and wholesome.

For example, if you or I find that our relationships are damaged or dysfunctional, then we should *want* to repent - to turn-around those relationships. If our faith is floundering or lifeless, yet we want it to be passionate and alive, then repentance is certainly in order. However, just as it's important that we don't let others beat us down with a heavy-handed call to "repent", it's equally important that we don't beat ourselves-up in our own efforts to repent and to change our ways. The call to repentance *can* have a sharp and urgent tone; but it should also

be tempered with a spirit of genuine grace and compassion, forgiveness and hope.

The process of repentance offers us a fresh start in the way we live, the way we love, the way we relate to the Holy One and to one another. And though the way of repentance is not an easy one, it's certainly a worthwhile path to pursue. It is a journey that is essentially traveled by *faith* - by trusting that our Divine Creative Source truly does love us, and wants us to do well in our lives. Now, "doing well" doesn't necessarily mean that we will have great wealth, or power, or prestige. It means that we will *do* well - by helping those in need, by standing-up for the underdog, and by treating every person we meet with respect and kindness, fairness and compassion.

Today, you and I, like John the Baptist, have the marvelous opportunity to help "Prepare the Way of the Lord" - not by running people over, but by lifting them up and encouraging them to do well in *their* lives. And perhaps the best way we can do this, is by showing them the Divine Compassion and Grace that we ourselves have already experienced, and by joyfully inviting them to share it with us; to come and join us on this remarkable journey of faith, hope and love.