

“A MAN SENT FROM GOD”
John 1:6-8, 19-28
Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

I don't know about you, but just the smell of fresh coffee brewing this morning when I walked into the church parlor got my blood pumping a little faster! How many have had their morning coffee? You know what I am talking about, don't you? I have been a serious coffee drinker since college days, and in seminary, I drank it by the pot. I'm not addicted to coffee. I can quit any time I want! Just give me two or three cups in the morning and nobody gets hurt!

Now somewhere along the way, somebody got the bright idea that it is the flavor that people crave, and since caffeine is a stimulant, you could take the caffeine out and still give people what they want. Personally, I have never understood decaffeinated coffee. I mean, what's the point? People say if they drink coffee, it keeps them awake at night. Exactly! I want to stay awake! I have too many things to do to start nodding off right after supper!

Someone said recently that the church in our day is serving decaffeinated Christianity. You can attend services, hear the sermon, participate in the programs, at your convenience, of course, and it is so palatable and so accommodating that nobody loses any sleep. Decaffeinated Christianity, you see. How tragic that a movement for which folks have bled and died, sacrificed their very lives, could in some quarters be marketed so as not to disturb the living patterns of its adherents.

The television preacher, who serves one of the world's largest and fastest growing churches, was asked, "What is the root of your success in attracting people?" He responded, "People are tired of getting beaten up in the name of Jesus. People are tired of being told that they are not all right. Jesus loves you just as you are. That's my message."

I guess that preacher is not reading about John the Baptist, as we are, this Sunday. Before we can get to Christmas we are always met by John, this wild preacher in the wilderness, who did not have a large congregation or an impressive church, a preacher who was not noted for his eloquence or his well-developed sermons. John had a simple, straightforward message for anybody who came out to the wilderness to hear him: "Repent! Prepare the way of the Lord!" "Repent" is a Bible word that means "turn around." It implies that we may be headed in the wrong direction, that the path we have been walking is not the right path, that there is something wrong with our lives, and that by the grace of God, we can change, we can turn around.

Following the lead of John the Baptist, the man sent from God to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus, I have three things I want to say this morning. The first of them is this: **We need to turn around!** If you can honestly look at your life and say that you are all that you need to be and ought to be, then I suppose you can check out of this sermon right now. But I don't know very many people who can honestly contend that they are living the life and walking the

path they should.

Some of you may remember the character on Saturday Night Live, the therapist whose favorite technique for counseling troubled people was to have them stare at themselves in the mirror and repeat over and over, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!”

John the Baptist has another message for us. “I am not as good as I was created to be. I do not know everything I need to know to live an abundant life, and doggone it, everybody else is on to me!” As a pastor, I’ve learned that this is a major reason why people, at least the most intelligent, honest and spiritually discerning people, come to church. They sense that God has created them for more, and they come to church hoping, praying for that miraculous turnaround. And when they hear John the Baptist say, “*Make straight the way of the Lord,*” they believe that God is speaking to them.

My second point is this: **Jesus can turn us around.** When we first hear John the Baptist, his words sound fierce and frightening. He scares some people, although I don’t think he means to. “Repent!” He says over and over again. “Change your ways.” If you happen to be someone who feels stuck with the way things are, trapped, at a dead end, caught, then his words can sound like Gospel, like good news. Repentance is possible. According to John, we can change. Jesus can turn us around.

I meet a lot of people who are having trouble moving forward in life. Perhaps the reason we are not able to move forward is that we are weighted down by our past. When we look back, and take stock of who we are and where we have been, we are painfully aware of our past sins. Some of us are weighted down, even paralyzed by our memory of unfaithfulness to those that we love. Some of us have made gods of our careers, and we are weighted down by the thoughts of one more phone call to make, one more letter to read, one more e-mail to respond to. Some of us are in despair over our past losses. I have seen people come apart due to the loss of a job. Just changing jobs can be traumatic, but the pink slip is almost too much to handle for most of us.

Amidst all the things that weight us down and keep us from moving forward in life, the message of God comes through John the Baptist with the wonderful news that God forgives our past. All of it! Everything we have ever said, everything that we have ever done. The slate is wiped clean! We are given a fresh start, a new beginning.

The difficulty for me, as theologian Paul Tillich once said, is to accept the fact that I am accepted. I want to put conditions on God’s love. I want to say, “Yes, but..” When you have been weighted down for a long time, even paralyzed, it’s hard to get in gear. But that’s what God is calling us to do.

We were living in Mansfield at the time the movie makers came to town to film *The Shawshank Redemption* at the one hundred year old Mansfield Reformatory. There was a lot of excitement in town, as you can imagine. Some of the folks from our church were hired as extras. A few were in the film. *The Shawshank Redemption* brought a lot of business to Mansfield during the filming. When the movie was released, we all wanted to see it, of course, and we were not disappointed. We discovered what the world now knows, that *The Shawshank Redemption* was and is a powerful and deeply theological motion picture.

One of the most moving scenes for me was when the man was released from prison after fifty years. Imagine fifty years behind bars! The gate of the prison opens, and he is set free! The cameras follow him as he walks out of the Reformatory, a free man. He gets a small

apartment and lives by himself. But he has a very difficult time coping with life on the outside. You see, he has had his meals served to him, his laundry done for him, his daily routine prescribed for him for fifty years. Now he is on his own, and he finds life as a free person intolerable. In one of the most gut wrenching scenes in the film, the man hangs himself in his small apartment, unable to cope with the freedom he has been granted. How tragic! What a sad commentary on our society.

Each of us has been set free, by the grace of God. We need to turn around. We are able to turn around. Jesus can turn us around. We need not be prisoners of our past. God has created us for so much more than we have been able to embrace.

I know a man who lived with degenerative hip disease for years, in constant pain and increasing disability, because he feared that a hip replacement would leave him unable to do the activities he cherished, but hadn't been doing because of the pain. The day after he finally submitted to the hip replacement, he walked up and down the corridor outside his hospital room and said, "Why didn't I listen? I'm out of pain for the first time in years. I should have done this ten years ago." Do we close our hearts and minds to what God might have in store for us? The message of John the Baptist is that a new age has begun. Do we believe it? Can we accept the fact that we are accepted and move forward with Christ and embrace all that God wants us to be?

This morning my third and last point is that just as the Bible tells us that "*There was a man sent from God whose name was John,*" so there is a man sent from God whose name is Charlie, a woman sent from God whose name is Donna, a boy whose name is Lyle, and a girl sent from God whose name is Sara. God has created each of us for a purpose. We have a reason to be here and a job to do. We are an anointed people. We are in Christ and Christ lives in us. We are his agents, his hands in the world. We are called to emulate him, to cross the false and imprisoning boundaries of the world with God's redemptive love. We are called to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. As Martin Luther said, we are to be "little Christs" to others. We are called to do what Jesus did, to follow in his steps.

If we are going to follow Jesus, we are going to have to turn around. Jesus can turn us around and show us all that God wants us to be and do for him. There is no decaffeinated Christianity where John the Baptist is concerned! He preaches the real stuff! He was sent from God for a reason, and so are we.

John 1:6 says, "*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.*" I would like to ask you to write these words on a small card or post-it note and put it where you will read it frequently: **There is a person sent from God whose name is _____.** Write your name. This verse of Scripture will change your life. It will prepare you for the coming of the Lord.

Prayer: Dear God, just as we read that "there was a man sent from God whose name was John," help us to realize that there is a man sent from God whose name is Charlie, a woman sent from God whose name is Amy, a boy named Paul, a girl named Rachel. Help us to sense our high calling. May we turn around and follow where you lead! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.