



**Sunday, December 8, 2024**  
**Second Sunday of Advent**  
**Luke 3:1-6**  
**"Getting Straightened Out"**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

Most Sunday afternoons, before the Packer game, Bill and I flip on the local high school quiz show "Scholastic Scrimmage." It debuted 50 years ago on the PBS affiliate for Lehigh Valley and has since been franchised to several other Pennsylvania PBS stations.

A fun part of each show is during the halftime break, when the host puts the same question to each contestant as a way of getting to know them. Recently it was, "What was the greatest innovation of the last 50 years?" Some predictable answers were the iPhone, the iPad, and the internet. But one team captain had a great answer: GPS. That's true: What *would* we do without it? We'd be lost, literally.

Back in the early days of GPS, maybe you remember that when you didn't follow one of the driving directions correctly, the system (usually a female voice) broke in with what always sounded to me like veiled contempt: "Recalculating! Recalculating! Recalculating!"

The reason I am thinking about this is that recalculating is what John the Baptist is calling us to do. Or in more common terms, getting straightened out.

Why is this call to recalculate necessary? How have we gotten off the path? Have we been misled? Where have we gone wrong?

Today's Gospel reminds us that we are dealing not only with the here and now, but with our place in the panorama of the world's salvation. The kingdom of God breaks in not with abstract theories, but through real people in the unfolding of human history – which is what lifts the first phrase of our Declaration of Independence into immortality: "When in the course of human events...."

And was there ever a more real, meaning authentic, human being than John the Baptist? A wild man, living in the desert, foraging for whatever he could lay his hands on, wearing whatever he could find. He roamed the region of the Jordan River shouting that people needed to straighten themselves out by committing themselves to God-focused, human-centered action. This was not just a call, but an exhortation - a challenge - a command. Today we hear it, and we must respond.

Who is this John that is challenging the way of life we've been living? Luke shows us what he is not by opening this chapter with a list of the contemporary power brokers. John is not like Tiberius, the omnipotent Emperor; or Pilate, the governor who a few years later would cruelly weigh his own popularity against Jesus' in deciding to send Jesus to the cross; or Herod Antipas, lord of Galilee of his brother Philip, or Lysinias, head of the local province, or the high priests Annas and Caiphas.

John, on the other hand, had no power and no constituency. Yet he changed the course of history in preparing the Jewish people for their Messiah by raucously demanding of whoever was in earshot that they reorient their lives around the justice that is God's own character and which Jesus comes to proclaim as truth – truth that saves, not lies that condemn.

So today, are YOU prepared for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Well, SHE might need it, you say, pointing to your nemesis, but not me. I'm great.

I'm fine. It's like the person who recently asked me about our Longest Night service on December 19. What is that, she wanted to know?

I explained it's for those who might want a more contemplative experience of Christmas, who might be dealing with loss or a setback and might not be in the mood for all the usual merriment. "Oh," she said, "I don't need that, we're fine. We're happy."

Fair enough. But if you think there is nothing for which John could be calling you to get straightened from, you may need to recalculate.

- Consider our economy of overconsumption and accumulation. Think of all the billionaires who will soon be in charge of major aspects of our daily lives. Does their grotesque wealth suggest they care anything for us little people?
- Think of our culture of inequity and indifference - those who turn a blind eye to anyone who doesn't fit the mold, or worse, who crusade to cast them into the outer darkness.
- Think of the superficial spirituality all around us. The music that is blanketing the airwaves has nothing to do with Christmas. These songs should instead be labeled "holiday pop."
- Think of the arrogant judgmentalism, not to mention the non-grammatical language, that is darkening our landscape. Doesn't anyone care how this all sounds?
- Think of all the ways those with newfound power are planning to remove laws and provisions that help and protect people. Shouldn't all government leaders be dedicated to preserving and protecting those in their care? We have this in Hatfield Borough and Township. Why not everywhere?

Ah, but I am not doing these things myself, you say. Yet, by your silence you are condoning them. Not John. He had the courage to call everyone out. If you are serious about opening a straight path for Christ, you must be calling everyone out, too.

Let's use words from today's gospel to imagine what could be holding you back. Are you being swallowed up by valleys of discouragement? Then fill them with the hope that is ours in Christ. Are mountains of frantic busyness getting in the way? Level them with the humility of knowing that God's will is being done through you no matter what. Remember, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of Jesus Christ."

Are you discouraged by the rough ways of injustice? Then get involved in advocacy, where every person truly makes a difference. And if roadblocks in your personal life are holding you back – family quarrels, professional jealousies – now is the time to resolve them. Without doing that, you cannot fling the gates wide open to greet your promised king, as we'll be singing next week. In other words, get yourself straightened out!

The true meaning of Advent is not preparing for the Incarnation, but an active and impatient waiting for the completion of the work of redemption. In this waiting, all our work and study and prayer and living must take on a single purpose: to bring us and all humanity into the kingdom of God -- that kingdom in which our four candles of Advent – hope, peace, joy, and love – are fully realized. Christ's return signifies that this has been accomplished.

So as we move through these days, let's make the central prayer of the church our own prayer. It's the Bible's last word: Maranatha! Come! Come, Lord Jesus!