



December 5, 2021  
Sermon Series: *Blessed are Those Who Believe*

*All Flesh Shall See Salvation*  
Pastor Peter Strommen

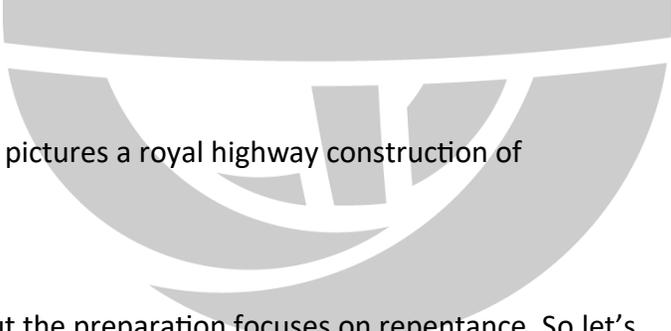
LUKE 3:1-6 NRSV

<sup>1</sup>In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. <sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; <sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

The preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick told this little story. A boy asks the pastor, "Why are all the vitamins in spinach, and not in ice cream where they ought to be?" "I don't know," replied the pastor, "but the vitamins are in spinach, and God is in every wilderness."

Our Scripture text for today says the "Word of God" came to John in the desert. It calls for a time of preparation; so that "all flesh shall see salvation." That preparation uses a word that can sound heavy or forbidding in our time — "repentance." But if we consider it closely, repentance in God's hands is a real gift, for it helps us to see.

These 6 verses have a flow if we stand back a bit. The powerful people of the time - - Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and high priests like Caiaphas are named to locate John in time and place. But does the Word of the Lord come to or from these? No. It comes to John in the desert. At the edges of civilization he proclaims this word, in and around the River Jordan, where he baptizes for "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And as



to his identity, he quotes the prophet Isaiah, whose poetry pictures a royal highway construction of preparation.

The purpose of this all is so that “all flesh see salvation.” But the preparation focuses on repentance. So let’s take a closer look at repentance this morning. It’s all about helping us see.

Literally, “repentance” means turning around, changing direction. Perhaps it entails letting go of some things, or beginning with others. But its core meaning is quite literal. If we are walking away from God, and then turn towards God, what we will see is altogether changed.

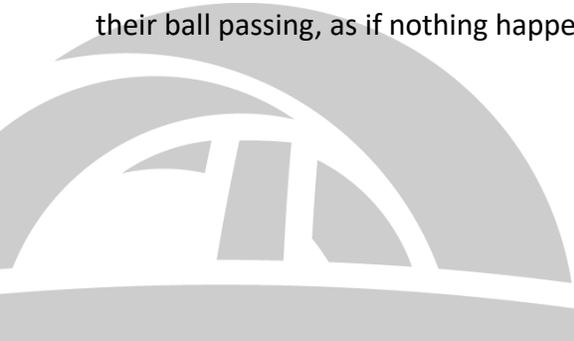
Perhaps the Bible’s connection between repentance and wilderness gets at the fact we humans generally don’t like to change, especially if we are comfortable as we are. Philosopher Paul Homer used to say: “hard times can be good because that may be the only way “God gets a crack at us.”

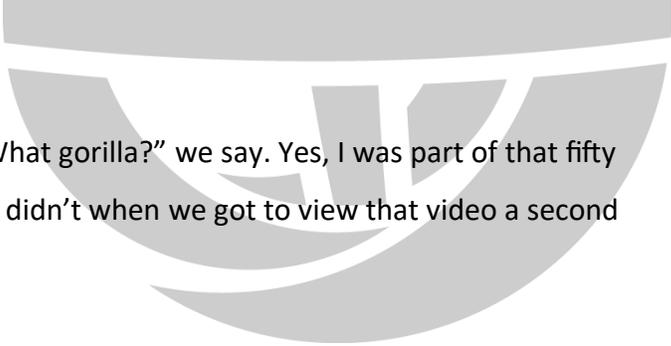
Anyway, the job of preparing goes to a humble prophet in the desert, not a rich and finely dressed high priest in a great Temple. Hype and celebrity status rarely help create repentance.

Spiritually, this all makes really good sense too, because sin blinds us spiritually. An iconic video demonstrates how our focus on one thing can blind us even to the obvious, illustrating the limits of seeing what is before us.

A group of students are divided into two groups, identified by the color of their t-shirts—let’s say green and white. They throw basketballs back and forth, moving around as they throw and catch while they are videoed. Viewers of this video are asked to count the number of times a green-shirted student throws to a white-shirted student.

Unknown to the viewers however, is that about 30 seconds into the video, a man dressed in a gorilla suit will stroll onto the stage, right in the midst of the students, and for 45 seconds act like a gorilla. (Although the students do not react to it.) The gorilla then leaves, and for the last 30 seconds the students continue with their ball passing, as if nothing happened.





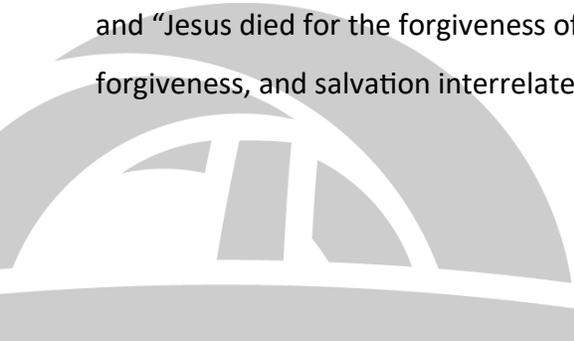
Fifty percent of the video viewers do not see the gorilla. “What gorilla?” we say. Yes, I was part of that fifty percent! I did not see the gorilla, and was astonished that I didn’t when we got to view that video a second time. How can this be?

The Bible teaches that sin blinds us from seeing God, even truth, goodness, and love. And we can appreciate that by picturing our direction before repentance. Our focus before repentance is driven by a different kind of seeing. Sin is artful in the way it moves us away from God, and changes our focus. We can see this in familiar Bible stories.

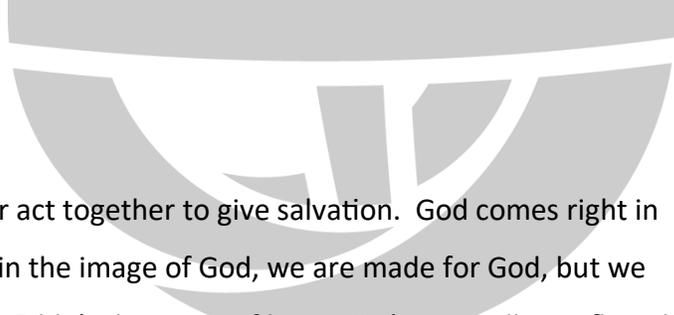
What happens to Adam and Eve after they disobey God? They hide. That is so insightful, because that’s one of the ways that shame and guilt function in relationships. We distance and avoid the one we’ve offended.

Another way we deal with sin is to bury it, even try to forget it—much like a person may dig a hole, and bury the evidence of a crime, cover it over, and hope it is not discovered. King David did this after he feared his adultery with Bathsheba would be discovered by her husband Uriah. David used his power to engineer Uriah’s death in a battle, and then took Bathsheba as his wife. However, sin buried has a toxic energy of its own, and often takes the form of judging others. Nathan the prophet skillfully used this to confront David, telling him a story about grave injustice by a powerful man over a poor man, to which David reacted strongly: “this man should die!” “You are that man,” said Nathan. David is struck to the core. Psalm 51 describes his repentance, and its a good thing he did too—for his own sake, and for the sake of his rule as king.

In our society, busyness and attention to endless distractions can draw us away from what matters most without our intending it. That’s what the gorilla video showed. We only can focus meaningfully on a finite number of things. It amazed me that my focus on counting the number of times a white t-shirted student caught a ball could blind me to the most important and seemingly obvious appearance of the whole video, the gorilla. But it did.



The earliest summaries of the gospel include phrases like: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand,” (Jesus) and “Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins.” Comprehending the true depth and power of how repentance, forgiveness, and salvation interrelate eludes us, but there is no question of its importance.



The gospel shows us that God doesn't wait until we get our act together to give salvation. God comes right in the middle of our messy human situation. We are created in the image of God, we are made for God, but we also struggle with the spiritually blinding power of sin—the Bible's diagnosis of humanity's tragically conflicted nature. This makes repentance and preparation both a necessity and a blessing. It also means God is with us in the middle of our most barren deserts. We want a royal highway for our God to enter this.

When God enters our dark times, sometimes in the midst of evil itself, it is always for our good. This is something Paul understood. "In all things, God works for good for those that love him" he writes in Romans. He is not saying all things are good. Rather, that IN all things God works for good. And this message is so important because who among us has no struggles, failures, even tragedies? Who among us is without sin?

And here is gracious, counterintuitive invitation: look to the very One we sin against to see salvation. Look to Christ Jesus. Practice the "courage of imperfection," and see the depth and breadth of God's love.

