

“The Spiritual Pathfinder”

During World War II thousands of special airborne troops known as paratroopers jumped out of airplanes into battle areas. The best known divisions in the United States army were the 82nd division, known as the American division, and the 101st, known as the Screaming Eagles. On D-Day, June 6, 1944, some 16,000 men were dropped into Normandy, France ahead of the amphibious landings in order to secure the areas behind the beaches.

A special group of 200 airborne troops known as pathfinders landed at 12:15 am in France. They were the first troops on the ground on D-Day. The pathfinder teams dropped approximately thirty minutes before the main body in order to locate designated drop zones and provide radio and visual guides in order to improve the accuracy of the jump. Their navigational aids included compass beacons, colored panels, and colored smoke. When they jumped, the pathfinders would encounter less resistance than the follow-up waves of paratroopers simply because they had the element of surprise on their side.

The purpose of the pathfinders was to make sure troops were dropped in the right area and to make sure they were not scattered. In the first two American airborne campaigns in North Africa and Sicily, pathfinders were not used. In both areas, problems with men being dropped over a large area were encountered. In

July 1943 during a drop over Sicily, troops were scattered as far as 65 miles from their drop zones due to high winds and poor navigation. General James Gavin of the 82nd airborne liked to claim credit for inventing the Pathfinders, pointing to the problems in Sicily, but most historians say the true credit goes to the 509th Parachute Infantry.

The Pathfinders biggest success during World War II occurred during Operation Market Garden on September 17, 1944 into Holland. This was actually the largest airborne drop of World War II. This battle was made into a movie called “A Bridge Too Far.” Although the operation ultimately failed due to delays among the British ground forces, the airborne divisions (82nd and 101st) accomplished most of their missions. This was due in large part to the efforts of the pathfinder forces. A combination of the drop taking place in broad daylight and the fact that the Germans were not expecting an airborne attack allowed the pathfinders to land on target and guide in the rest of the paratroopers to the proper location.

In Luke 3:1-6 John the Baptist is the pathfinder for Jesus’ ministry on earth. John was the prophet who would go before Jesus and who would prepare the way. John the Baptist fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. In Malachi 3:1 God says he is sending his messenger to prepare the way before him. In Isaiah 40:3 we

read that a voice cries out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight in the desert a highway for our God. This voice was John the Baptist.

Why did Jesus need a pathfinder? John the Baptist called the people to repentance. He was needed in order to show the people the need for salvation. Jesus would then come as their savior and their sins would be forgiven. John pointed the people to Jesus just as pathfinders pointed the airborne troops to their drop zones.

Many have an impression of John the Baptist as a crazy man with a weird diet. Some of this belief comes from the scriptures themselves as well as depictions in popular movies. The Gospels read that John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He did not eat meat or drink wine. His clothing and diet recalls the prophets of the Old Testament, namely Elijah. One must understand John was in the tradition of the prophets. He was not crazy. As Luke references the Old Testament passages of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1, one realizes John's proclamations are grounded in the Jewish scripture.

Luke sets John's ministry in the framework of God's salvation in and through Israel. Part of this setting is John's appearance in the wilderness. The wilderness is important in Jewish salvation history. Salvation traditionally comes

from the wilderness. Moses, Elijah and David had to flee into the wilderness to be saved. Jesus will go into the wilderness before his public ministry.

John the Baptist exemplifies a form a prophetic leadership among the people that galvanizes popular hopes for renewal and leadership. The people of his time served under the yoke of the Roman Empire. When one looks back to the passages from Isaiah and Malachi, these were written at a time the Israelites were in exile in Babylon and Assyria. The Isaiah passage brings words of hope to those discouraged by years of exile. The good news in Luke from John the Baptist is that the hopes of salvation have been fulfilled.

John's ministry was also a threat to the established order. John's execution by Herod Antipas indicates John was a threat. John's execution also foreshadows the execution of Jesus himself.

We must be clear that John's role was to introduce Jesus Christ as the coming one, not to warn that divine judgment was near. John's statements show a difference in power between Jesus and John the Baptist and identify Jesus' appearance as the approach of God.

So, what does the story of John the Baptist mean to you? The good news is a simple message about salvation in Jesus Christ. Both modern men and women

can recapture the eager expectation that God will redeem humanity from the human powers of suffering, evil and injustice.

We prepare for the coming of the Lord at this time of year. The passage we read today asks us what it means to prepare for Jesus' coming. We learn from John the Baptist that the Lord does not come to a people unprepared. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is not just a feeling of regret but an ordering of one's life to be acceptable to God. The American church, mirroring the American economy in terms of private enterprise, often only believes in privatization. The church has often only taught us the privatized, personalized view of *metanoia*, or repentance. The cosmic aspect of *metanoia*, however, yields rich fruit for the people of God.

John's baptism of repentance is not simply a call for piety and morality. It is nothing short of the labor pains preceding the inauguration of God's reign. John is calling for the world to change---spiritually, economically, politically, and socially--in anticipation of the advent of Jesus. John is a direct threat to imperial theology and power. His calls for repentance affected the public discourse. Those who leave the social order uninterrupted don't get beheaded by the state.

Isaiah's soaring poetry is cited to cast the vision, "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; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Our faith is not a private matter. God will level out and straighten the playing field. The earth will never be the same. Humanity will never be the same.

Let us now come to the Communion table with a spirit of repentance and an acceptance of God’s forgiveness.