

**Malachi 3:1-14**

**Luke 3:1-6**

**December 9, 2018**

**Second Sunday in Advent**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, North Carolina*

### **R.S.V.P.: REPENTANCE**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

It's the most wonderful time of the year.

According to Martha Stewart, it's also officially party season. In fact, December is the busiest party season of the year, especially the two Saturdays leading up to Christmas. So, Martha says, send out your invitations accordingly.

Perhaps you've already received one or more invitations to holiday parties or a Christmas wedding or two. You may have found an R.S.V.P. card tucked in the envelope or in the e-vite. Maybe you have yet to R.S.V.P. According to the etiquette experts, if you don't R.S.V.P., that's a major faux pas! In fact, the lack of an R.S.V.P. tops the list of irritations for party hosts and wedding planners.

According to Advice on the Emily Post etiquette website, "Anyone who receives an invitation has an important obligation to reply as soon as possible. And yet so many don't. Some forget; other procrastinate and then feel guilty, so they delay even longer. To many a host on the non-receiving end of an RSVP, it seems as if an invitee is simply waiting for something 'better' to possibly come along. One of the sad parts about the demise of the RSVP is that relationships often suffer due to hosts' resultant hurt feelings and frustration."<sup>1</sup>

The Advent season reminds us of God's invitation to enter his kingdom, to join him at the heavenly banquet. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus' first public words are these: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) That invitation sounds a lot like John's invitation in today's gospel lesson: "He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3:3)

In commentary after commentary, article after article about this story of John appearing in the wilderness, the idea of God extending an invitation to us occurred again and again.

- Fred Craddock: Both the Lord's coming and the preparation for that coming are the invitation of a gracious God.
  - the gospel for Luke consists of the gift of repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel and to ALL nations;
  - God's invitation, through John's preaching, means including ALL people in God's saving invitation;
- Walter Brueggemann: "an invitation to persons who have lost their freedom, an invitation to be restored to the freedom of God"

- Christine Chakoian: “Now in the wilderness John invites everyone to be formed into God’s people.”
- Journey with Jesus: “He invites us to make our crooked ways straight, to flatten all hilly terrain, and to prepare space for the birth of the Messiah into their own lives.”

This afternoon you might want to dig through that pile of mail and Christmas cards on your kitchen counter and find the invitations you need to R.S.V.P., before it’s too late. According to another etiquette blog, one of the top six invitation faux pas is “when the invitation arrives, you don’t file it in the ‘putting-it-off-for-another-day’ pile.”<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, invitation etiquette works in some cases for John’s invitation to repent for forgiveness, and in other cases the etiquette rules miss the mark. Consider this list from Emily Post:

- “Being a no show is unacceptable.” Well, that certainly seems to apply to John’s preaching, Jesus’ announcement, and God’s invitation. If you don’t show up, you’ll miss the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of God.
- “Changing a ‘yes’ to a ‘no’ is only acceptable on account of illness or injury, a death in the family, or an unavoidable professional or business conflict.” That may hold true for party invitations, but when it comes to responding to God’s invitation to salvation, changing your ‘yes’ to a ‘no’ has some serious consequences.

- That reminds me of the song we used to sing when I was in youth group back in the ‘70’s – “The Wedding Banquet.” The song is based on Jesus’ parable about the man who threw a big party and sent out the invitations.

*A certain man held a feast  
On his fine estate in town.  
He laid a festive table,  
He wore a wedding gown,  
He sent out invitations  
To his neighbors far and wide,  
But when the meal was ready  
Each of them replied:  
I cannot come, I cannot come  
to the banquet,  
Don’t trouble me now,  
I have married a wife,  
I have bought me a cow,  
I have fields and commitments,  
That cost a pretty sum,  
Pray hold me excused,  
I cannot come.*

- “Changing a ‘no’ to a ‘yes’ is only okay if it will not upset the host’s arrangements.” But, can you imagine God being offended if we changed our ‘no’ to a ‘yes’? Listen to a parable Jesus told to the religious leaders of his time when they questioned his authority and criticized the company he was keeping: “What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God

ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”  
(Matthew 21:28-32)

- “Canceling because you have a “better” offer is a sure fire way to get dropped from ALL the guest lists.” This faux pas fits into the same category as “saving it for later.” Again, this sounds a lot like what Jesus said to his would-be followers: “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’”  
(Luke 9:57-62)

As one writer puts it, “God sending his prophets is one thing; our listening to them is another. John the Baptist announced the claims of God’s kingdom upon our lives as ultimate, which means that the claims of race, gender, culture, money and political or religious allegiance are, at best, penultimate. With his announcement John counsels us to repent of anything and everything that might hinder ultimate allegiance to Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

When John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness beyond the Jordan and the Word of God came upon him, the people of God got excited. It seemed that God’s 400 year-old promise was coming true, the promise we heard from the last book of the Old Testament: “See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 3:1)

It is significant, especially in the gospel of Luke, that the Word of God did not come upon Emperor Tiberius or Pontius Pilate or Herod or Philip or Lysanias or Annas or Caiaphas. It is significant that the Word of God did not come to any of these powerful, well-known leaders in Rome or Judea or Galilee or Ituraea or Trachonitis or Abilene or Jerusalem. Instead, the Word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. Once again, God’s people are in the wilderness, hearing God’s invitation to put their trust in him, to return to him, to follow in his ways, to repent for the forgiveness of sins, to make the paths straight, to see God’s salvation.

Mark Kolden writes, “Salvation open to all is the purpose of John’s baptism of repentance, just as it was the purpose of the calling of the chosen people of Israel. . . for this Sunday the emphasis is on God’s everlasting mercy and faithfulness, working in, with, under, and despite the political and religious communities to reach all people, to make all things new and right. ‘Repentance’ in this context is not so much returning to God, still less feeling sorry for past offenses; rather, it is a turning back toward God’s

future as that was spelled out and inaugurated in Jesus. While it may often seem to us as if life just rolls along, with no plot or purpose or direction, this passage tells us that God is at work, that he entered into history in a decisive way in Jesus, and things will never be the same again. Faith means living from that center; it means that we always have our bearings at a particular spot, in an event that took place ‘in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius’.”<sup>4</sup>

In the eighteenth year of the twenty-first century, when Donald Trump is President of the United States, and Roy Cooper is Governor of North Carolina, and Charley Farris is mayor of Wallace, and Philip Gladden is the minister at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, and Clay Blue, Christy Johnson, Dottie Obenour, Dan Robinson, Michael Teachey, Linda Burroughs, Dean Hanson, Geneva Maready, Jason Rouse, Curt Simpson, Nick Baker, Ann Carter, Nell Sloan, Joe Tillman, and Susan Walters are elders at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, in the midst of our history, in the midst of our day-to-day lives, the Word of God, God’s invitation, comes to us: “Repent, make ready the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.” God’s invitation is just as urgent and sincere today as it was out there in the wilderness beyond the Jordan when John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and when Jesus said, “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, who talked about God’s invitation to people who have lost their freedom says that, with our R.S.V.P. to God’s invitation “as persons and as community we will need to quit being who we have been if we would be citizens of the new age.”<sup>5</sup> An R.S.V.P. of repentance is more than just listing the things we are sorry for or the wrongs we have committed. An R.S.V.P. of repentance means a change of orientation, going in a new direction, answering the invitation to walk along the Lord’s straight and smooth paths so that we might see the salvation of God. When we R.S.V.P. God’s invitation, changing our ‘no’ to a ‘yes’ is never a faux pas in God’s etiquette.

Let’s go back to the Wedding Banquet song for a minute. The song ends with a different refrain. The last verse ends, “when the Lord and Master calls us, be certain then to say: Yes I will come, yes I will come to the banquet, no trouble at all. My wife will come, with the cows in the stall. My fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum, I’ll leave them behind, I’ll surely come.”

How will we R.S.V.P. God’s invitation? I don’t know how many people write out R.S.V.P.’s these days, what with enclosed reply cards and email invites. If we were to write an R.S.V.P. to God, we could do no better than to write it with how we live day-to-day, as we await the second Advent of our Lord and Savior. But if we did put pen to paper or pray to God, perhaps our R.S.V.P. of repentance might sound something like this letter, written almost a century ago by Dr. Roland Walker, who was a faculty member at Ohio Wesleyan University:

“To the Governing General of the Universe, Dear Sir: I hereby resign my self-appointed position as directing superintendent of my own life and the world. I cannot level all the mountains of injustice, nor fill the valleys of selfishness. There is too much

of it in me. I hereby turn over to you for your disposition and use, my life, my money, my time, and my talent to be at your disposal. Your obedient servant . . .”

Now THAT is an appropriate R.S.V.P. – for Advent, for every day.

***Let us pray: God of hope, you raised up John the baptizer as a herald who calls us to repentance. As we joyfully await the glorious coming of Christ, hear our humble prayer that we may serve you in holiness and faith and give voice to your presence among us until the day of the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“What to Do When Guests Don’t RSVP,” [www.emilypost.com/advice](http://www.emilypost.com/advice)

<sup>2</sup>H. Morgan, “Top Six Wedding Faux Pas,” January 28, 2018, at [www.uncoverdiscover.com](http://www.uncoverdiscover.com).

<sup>3</sup>“John the Baptist: Divine Wisdom from the Lunatic Fringe,” For Sunday December 10, 2006, Second Sunday in Advent, at [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net).

<sup>4</sup>Mark Kolden, “The Birth of Jesus Never Saved Anyone: The Lucan Advent Texts,” in *Word and World* 11/4 (1991), [www.wordandworld.lutheransem.edu](http://www.wordandworld.lutheransem.edu).

<sup>5</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation* 10/76, p. 109.