

This clever opening of Luke's cuts 2 ways.

On one level, it is the proper way to historically date an event.

It names the ruling parties, beginning with the Roman overlords, proceeding to the Jewish rulers,

and finally acknowledging Temple authorities.

Hierarchical protocol is correctly followed.

We know the time and place of John the Baptizer

by situating him in the context of the major players of the day.

On another level, it is a scathing theological judgment on the Roman and on the Jewish political leadership and religious establishment.

The Word of God bypassed them all.

The Word of God doesn't stop at palaces or the Temple.

It searches out a priest's son who is also a prophet and finds him in the desert.

The desert is a place of purification and inner scrutiny, far away from the machinations of power.

John's out in the wilderness baptizing.

John's baptism is an outer ritual

meant to express and facilitate an inner process.

He's here to help folks jumpstart their readiness for seeing God's salvation

Repentance is what he preaches.

Repentance is a translation of the Greek word *metanoia*.

Metanoia literally means going beyond the mind.

When we can get past and go beyond whatever's going on in our mind, we receive the forgiveness of sins.

There's something inside our head that holds onto sins –

there's something about going beyond such a mind that lets go of sins.

But sometimes our minds have a mind of their own!

Thoughts just pop into our heads sometimes, don't they?

There's a brilliant little book that received the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 called TINKERS by Paul Harding.

It's the story of George Crosby in the days before he dies

and his thoughts and memories that he hoped he could control.

George Crosby remembered many things as he died, but in an order he could not control. To look at his life, to take stock he always imagined a man would at his end, was to witness a shifting mass, the tiles of a mosaic spinning, swirling, reportraying, always in recognizable swaths of colors, familiar elements, molecular units, intimate currents, but also independent now of his will, showing him a different self every time he tried to make an assessment. p. 18

We're not always in control of what's going on in our head.

The process that concerns John the Baptizer is how we deal with the wounds that have been inflicted on us and the wounds we have inflicted on others. Unfortunately, there's an adhesive quality about sinful experiences – they stick – we remember the beatings, the humiliations, the hateful glances, and the mocking words! The wrongs done to us are available to our memory in a way neutral or even positive experiences are not. Although the experience of sin begins with being sinned against, we are quick learners in this way of being human. We soon learn to wound others. We engage in hitting, lying, cheating, betraying.... Soon we can tell our life story in term of the blows received and given. It is a tale of sin, and even if we repress it, it secretly shapes our sense of who we are. And soon, we're not able to hear the real name God calls us.

For John the Baptizer this is the necessary work of preparation. Borrowing the language of the prophet Isaiah, He sees himself as a construction worker/engineer/architectural planner. He's building the main highway for the Lord's arrival. Whatever's an obstacle will be removed. If the road is winding, it'll be straightened. If it's rough, it'll be smoothed. If a mountain's in the way, it'll be flattened. If a valley slows travel time, it'll be lifted into a flat surface. The effect of these multiple images is a sense of determination. Whatever's needed to ease the Lord's arrival will be done. This is a man on a mission.

But what is this going beyond the mind to let go of sins preparation for? The account of Jesus' baptism gives us an answer in images. In the Gospel, when Jesus comes out of the water, he prays. In prayer, the sky opens, the Spirit as a dove descends, and the heavenly voice affirms, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" Luke 3.22 This is the goal of going beyond the mind and forgiveness of sins. It readies baptized folks like you and me to hear God's transcendent word of love! Without forgiveness of sins we won't see the dove descend or hear the voice of love from the sky calling us, "beloved daughter/son". The full process entails going beyond the mind to let go of sins and receive the Holy Spirit.

This is what happens to Jesus, and this is for his followers too!
John's highway is ultimately a path to let God get close –
to make it possible to welcome Jesus anew as the giver of the Spirit.