

A goat.

Once a year on the day of Atonement the chief priest was commanded to take a goat and place his hands on the head of the goat and confess over it all the sins and all the rebellious acts and all the wrongdoings of the people of Israel. All the sins of the people transferred to the head of the goat. And then the goat was released in the wilderness, left to wander, to struggle for survival in the wilderness. And the people were freed from their sins.

Then what? Back to the same old sins? Back to being the same rebellious people? Back to a life of everyone looking out for herself – himself?

A week ago in this very place most of you heard the announcement that all your sins had been forgiven – not through a goat but through the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And that is exactly what he did – took all your sins away into the wilderness of his death on the cross. One week ago all your sins were carried off. Then what? Were you changed? Did you change? Did that fresh start produce some results in you?

A long time ago the word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness. And John called the people to come out there into the wilderness to receive a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A washing away of all their sins, but not just that. Not just forgiveness but repentance. A turning for that is what the word means in the Greek. Repentance – a turning. A new direction – a new beginning. John called them out of the promised land and into the land of the 40 years wandering. From there they would enter into God's holy land, a people prepared for the Lord. Only this time it was not the land that was to be conquered, but the hearts of God's people.

Sometimes we talk as if repentance is just saying, "I'm sorry." We are like the husband who drinks too much and shouts at his family and then sobers up and says, "I'm sorry." They forgive – he drinks too much again, he shouts, he sobers up - says he is sorry, they forgive and the whole cycle repeats itself on and on. There is no turning in this kind of repentance – no new beginning – no repentance at all. Only the desire to get rid of the guilt.

So a goat is sent off into the wilderness with the sins and no one is changed.

Or you or I hear a word of forgiveness and go right on doing the very same things.

When John came baptizing he was sure this time would be different. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley will be filled. Every mountain and hill will be leveled. The crooked ways will be made straight. The rough roads will be made smooth. All people will see the salvation of God.

What do you think? Were all those folks who went out to John changed by the experience? The Bible gives us no evidence of any great change. The crowds so filled with hope and anticipation must have gone back to their clothes washing and sandal making and tax collecting. And mountains and hills and crooked roads remained.

Has it ever been like that for you? A moment when you are convinced that this time there will be a difference – a new beginning – and yet as time goes on you are still the same you. Same sins, same weaknesses, same fears. No matter how hard you try – especially when you really try – you are still the same you? Then it might seem enough to get a weekly dose of forgiveness and to just keep on keeping on.

But another will follow John. If John calls us to trying harder and doing better Jesus will call us to faith. With humans it is impossible to be new, but not with God. With God all things are possible.

How would you begin the process of change if you believe it all depended on God? With prayer?

Would you pray – Lord, I cannot change myself – only you can make me new. Grant me your grace to not take that first drink – only you Lord can keep me sober today.

Would you pray – Lord, I am afraid. Only you Lord can watch over me. Give me trust in you.

Would you pray – Lord, I cannot make myself listen to others – only you Lord can give me the patience to listen. Calm my spirit and my mind and enable me to really listen today.

Would you pray – Lord, I am afraid about my future – whether there will be enough money someday for my care. Give me trust so that I can share with those who are hungry today.

Pray – and set your eyes and your ears and your heart on the one whose way John prepared. For he is God’s impossible possibility – in him all people will see God’s salvation.