

He watches me swim three mornings a week. For years he has been the morning lifeguard at EMH Health and Fitness Center. A few years ago he would study as he watched. He was in school studying graphic design. The other morning I asked if he was still in school. “No, I’ve been done for quite a while -can’t find a job.”

He is not alone.

I am guessing that it is not about him – his skills, his knowledge, his dedication. It is all about how the world has changed in the year 2009. Had he been born ten years earlier, graduation might have brought many job offers. But not now.

None of us chooses the moment of birth – none of us chooses land of birth, parents, siblings. Some of the most important things in our lives are not in our power.

When Luke tells us of the public ministry of John he begins with describing the moment in time - fifteenth year of the reign of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod ruler of Galilee, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. It was not a good moment in time. Peasant people were being victimized by taxes and land grabs – the poor were getting poorer and the rich were getting richer. Religious leaders were protecting themselves and their power. Political rulers were sucking the little people dry. Roman gods were honored and praised – the people of the God of Israel being crushed. In just this situation, the word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness – that word led him to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

How weak and powerless that seems. Instead of John changing the world out there – protecting the little ones, destroying the evil ones, God’s Word called John to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. God could have sent John to raise an army – it could have been like the moment our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrate at Hanukah when God’s servant Judas Maccabeus, Judas the Hammerer, led a revolt against the mighty Seleucid Empire and won. The Almighty God could have shown all the world what real power looked like, slaughtering all the enemies of God’s people, but no. John came proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

One by one people came down into the water of the Jordan – one by one they went under the water drowning old ways, old hopes, old fears and then rose out of the water ready to receive what God would be doing. John proclaimed repentance, metanoia is the word in Greek. It means second mind, after mind: a new way of being in the world that does not start with the world being changed but you being changed, me being changed in our minds and in our living.

I wish I could tell you that after John's baptism everything was different. No more sickness, no more injustice, no more poverty, no more crime, no more laziness, no more weakness, no more aging. I wish I could tell my lifeguard and many of you, "Do this and you will have a job, do this and the pain will go away, do this and your children will be successful, do this and your marriage will be strong." But today I can only invite you to go down into the waters letting go of everything that is not worthy of God in your life. Luther said that this is the daily path of a Christian, to drown in repentance everything that is not pleasing to God so that God may raise you new and forgiven - a fresh start every day.

And then what?

Will you get a job, or healing, or become young again? Will people like you - will your money troubles disappear?

John the Baptist was beheaded. Jesus, the one John was preparing the people for was crucified before he was raised. Sometimes prayer is followed by some marvelous surprises, sometimes like it was for Jesus prayer is followed by drinking the very cup we have pleaded not to drink. In this world the good guys do not always win. Still Luke who knows that tells us of the word of Isaiah: "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 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 be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

A world transformed – the mighty brought down, the lowly lifted up and people face to face on level ground – all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Jesus will do it. In the church each of us holds out empty hands to be filled by the life of Jesus. The richest and the poorest, the wisest and the most foolish all holding out empty hands. The honored saintly one, the shamed sinner side by side holding out empty hands to receive Jesus in faith.

Christmas is coming. Preschoolers can love the baby Jesus as much as I can – more than I can. Mountains will be made low, valleys lifted up, all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Amen.