Out text today is actually events that happened after Christmas. Jesus birth has already happened, and we’re talking about the purpose and mission of John the Baptist. And his mission of course is to prepare the way for Jesus and ministry. To do the prep work. So if you’re going to paint your living room, you have to prep it right? Take out the furniture, fill in the holes that might be in the wall, tape things off, put down tarps. So that when it’s time to do the painting it comes out well. So John the Baptist does the prep work. Which is often harder than the actual painting right? Prep work usually is time consuming and painstaking. And so today in our lesson, we’re getting ways of thinking, that we need to mull over and spend some time with, so that we’ll able to understand Jesus in a way that will go well. Because there are lots of understandings of Jesus that don’t go well. Lot’s of way that we can fall of the track. So we need to do our prep work well, and John the Baptist is the key to preparing the way of the Lord so to speak.

The first issue that we need to mull over is found in the first sentence of our lesson today. And what it is, is a huge contrast, a contradiction that we need to acknowledge and think about. I’ll just read the opening the sentence here and you should be able to notice the massive difference here between two different realities. In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region if Ituraea and Trachonitis and Lysanisa ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of the Lord came to John the Baptist in the wilderness. Do you see how that is written to emphasis a massive contrast?

Sure, you have all these powerful, prestigious, well connected, well healed people on one side. And there’s John the Baptist, alone in the wilderness sleeping on the ground, on the other side. It’s the huge contrast between power and powerlessness., between wealth and poverty, between the top dogs and this little mangy dog at the bottom outside of town. It couldn’t be more clear what the author here is trying to convey. This is the first part of the prep for Jesus.

And wherever we go, there it is. The text is just pointing out on of life most obvious realities. The box seats in the front row and the cheap seat in the back. The massive constrast between the worlds wealthiest people and the poor at the bottom. The insiders and the outsiders. Remember in Luke Jesus is born in a barn, and there no room in the Inn. This is the same contrast. The contrast between the powerful and the powerless. The people who are inside and the person is on the outside. And God comes where. On the outside…..at the bottom.

Another way to think about this is to think about the difference between order and chaos. All of the political leaders here represent order. Law and Order. The wilderness represents wildness and chaos. And this another obvious of life isn’t it. The struggle between order can chaos. This can be true about your bedroom. Trying to it clean, vs, this power that turns it into a total mess. We struggle with it here at the church in silly ways, but there is this tendancy for the rooms in the back to just fill up and get chaotic and then there is this need to gain control again. The government wants control, but around our borders there is all this chaos. I want my stock portfolios to be safe, but there is the chaos and uncertainty of the market. I want control over my life, but something keeps going wrong. This is a core spiritual issue in life, a core experience we all have. Being in control vs. being out of control and feeling like my world is just chaos. This is all represented by this one sentence. That powerful force that wants control, in contrast to the reality of finding ourselves bewildered and feeling alone right? We all want things ordered but we all know, “you never what might happen”. Chaos can happen at any moment. You can find yourself in the wilderness very rapidly. Slip on the ice and you can find chaos pretty rapidly. The relationship is going well and all the sudden you’re just bewildered. You’re out in the wilderness.

So what does it means then, that the Word of the Lord comes to John the Baptist in the wilderness? Not where there was all this power to keep things under control? What does it mean that the Word of the Lord is found in this bewildering chaos that we all find ourselves in? You’ve got things all figured out and then suddenly you don’t. You have to mull over that this is how we prepare for the coming of God into our lives. Preparing for God is preparing for what to do, when things seem out of control. When you are bewildered.

You can hear these words, but how will you translate this into your life this week? See preparing for God is more than just putting up Christmas trees. That’s awesome, but you also need to do the John the Baptist prepwork. That preparing for God is getting into you thinking that when you find yourself feeling bewildered, or out of control, or that you’re surrounded by chaos, that’s where you can begin to hear the Word of the Lord. It’s a complete reinterpretation of reality and how to often see it. We like to know and be in the know. The greatest obstacle to God there is, is what you already know about God. And the best preparation is finding yourself a little bewildered about God. Maybe having some hard questions. Feeling like you don’t get it. Now you’re prepared.

Interesting that John the Baptists message is primarily about repentance. And this is just a perfect example of the preparation process for the Word of God. Because if it’s one thing that probably all us think we understand, and have under control of it’s repentance. My guess is that we have a tendancy to have our minds made up about what repentance is. We’ve already learned it. I listen to people and what they say about repentance. And usually it’s about something they did that was wrong, and feeling sorry for it. And so repentance and forgiveness comes out, “I’m sorry for what I did, and forgiveness is oh, that’s OK”. Repentance is often primarily associated with guilt. I broke a rule of somekind, and repentance becomes showing remorse for that. I won’t do it again. And so it seems anyway that repentance is associated with feeling bad or feeling guilty, or feeling sorry, and then getting forgiven. I don’t have to feel bad or guilty anymore about whatever I did that was wrong or breaking the rules. Yeah! Hopefully I’m on the right track, if I’m not let me know. And this is set in our minds. It’s all under control. You’re guilty. And you need to repent, or else. It’s all set and perfectly under control.

But that’s not really what the word means. What repentance is far more about is simply changing your mind. It’s changing how you think about things. How easy it it these days, to change someone’s mind about something? Not too easy is it? Once we made up our minds about Biden or Trump, well that’s it. Because in order to change your mind, you would need to be be wildered for a while. Confused. You would find yourself in a wilderness. Maybe you’ve made up your mind about some person, or group. Or race, or sexual orientation. Or country. I’ve made up my mind. Well that’s what Ceasar and Herod and Pontius Pilate do right? They make up their minds and that’s it. That the position of control. That’s the position of being in charge. My mind’s made up. Well, you’re going to be much more careful about that if you understand repentance. John the Baptists prep work is repentance. And a repentant person is a person whose mind is always changing. You’re learning, and growing and there is no way to do that unless you’re willing to go through a little chaos, a little confusion, feeling like your out in the wilderness, out of control. Right?

We do have to make up our minds about things and make decisions. All the time. No doubt about that. But if you’re a repentant person you’ll be very careful and humble about how you do that. Because you know that whatever you think and whatever you’ve made up your mind about is imperfect and flawed. Unrepentance is I’ve made up my mind that’s it. It’s the biggest wall there is to God. Can’t work with that. A repentant persons mind is always changing, and learning. Always finding out about where improvement can be made, or a new insight discovered. But there is no way to do that unless you’re willing to be a bewildered for a while. The essence of repentance is humility. And the best definition I’ve heard yet about what it means to be humble is that you are a person who realizes that what you don’t know holds far more promise than what you do. But not knowing is the wilderness right? This is the prep work for God.

What’s interesting about the Christmas story of course is that every character gets taken outside of what they know. Every character finds themselves in the wilderness, a little bewildered. Remember poor Joseph. He just knew that Mary had been sleeping around. Joseph, Mary, the Wise Men, Herod, the Shepherds. Each one of them found themselves bewildered when God showed up. God took each one of them out of control and into a wilderness. Because that’s the only place where they’ll ever have any hope of repentance. That’s the message of John the Baptist.

If you find yourself a little bewildered at times this Christmas, now you can know what it might mean. It’s time to look for God and to have your mind changed. And God knows, we live in a world where people need to learn how to change their minds. Amen.

Contrast between power and control. We’re in charge. It represents law and order if you. And powerlessness and lack of control. We’re bewildered. Chaos. A contrast between the powerful, I’m full of power and powerless.

Change you mind. Salvation means what? Guilt.