Towson Presbyterian Church

December 5, 2021

The Second Sunday of Advent – Lighting the Candle of Love

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**Luke 3:1-20**

*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 of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,
‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
   make his paths straight.
5 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 made smooth;
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’*

*7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 9Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’*

*10 And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ 11In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ 12Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ 13He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ 14Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’*

*15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’*

*18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20added to them all by shutting up John in prison.*

Well, it is Advent, which means we always get a little John the Baptist, whose role, the Gospel writers tell us, was to prepare the way for Jesus. And every Advent we find John, out in the wilderness, on his own, baptizing people, and asking them to repent, or to change, and live life in a new way.

John was a unique guy…that’s one way we could say it…and Luke doesn’t share this, but in the Gospel of Mark, Mark takes time to describe John’s physical appearance. Mark says that John was clothed with camel’s hair – he’d been out in the wilderness for a while - and his diet consisted of locusts, and honey, and not store-bought honey, but probably straight from the hive. I have this image of him just digging his hand in…*Go ahead bees, sting me all that you want. I don’t care*.

Nobody else in the New Testament is described in such a physical way as John, which tells us something…he was this wild untamed man, who had run as far away as he could from society, and from organized religion. He hadn’t left God at all, but it sounds like he had left organized religion.

John the Baptist’s story is mainly found in the opening chapters of the Gospels. And the Gospel we’re reading from today, Luke, begins not with the story of Jesus’s birth, but with the story of *John’s* birth. John was the son of Zechariah, who was a priest that served in the Jerusalem Temple. John’s mother, Elizabeth, came from a lineage of priests. And so, John was born, we could say, into religious royalty. Religion was his life, it was the family business, and as he comes of age, we would expect John to be serving in the Jerusalem Temple with his father. He should be following in his father’s footsteps, right? That’s what he’s supposed to do, to serve in the Temple, where God was to literally dwell. For a man as passionate as he was about God, you’d think he’d want to be in the Temple. But instead, we find John out in the wilderness, far away from the Temple, eating locusts and yelling and baptizing.

And that he’s out in the wilderness, in the desert, seems to be an intentional move on his part. It’s not like us at TPC, who have our physical campus here at 400 W. Chesapeake in Towson and we occasionally like to head north up to BeeTree, the preserve we own in Parkton and have a worship service there. We like to get outside, be a part of God’s creation and worship. What John is up to seems to be very different. John isn’t just an outdoorsman who loves the fresh air of the wilderness. He might very well love the outdoors, but John in the wilderness and **not** in the Temple, baptizing people, and declaring that sins are forgiven, John seems to be intentionally critiquing the whole Jewish religious system.

For Jews in the first century, sins were forgiven through tithes you made *to the* Temple, and animal sacrifices that were made *at* the Temple, which were all administered by religious leaders, like his father. And by leaving the temple, which is where it all happened, and coming out to the wilderness, so far away from organized religion, John seems to be challenging the whole system – the whole religious system - and saying … well…it’s broken.

Jesus will eventually say the same thing. It’s not doing what it’s supposed to do. It’s not transforming people. It’s not changing people at a deep level. Baptism says that you go down into the water as one person and you come up as another. Life changes and you now go and live in a different way.

John had not left his faith or God at all, and he seems to be as passionate as ever, but it seems like he was trying to bring religion back to its center, to its original purpose. He looks at the religion of his day and says, “That’s not changing anybody. It might keep everybody in line, but there’s no real transformation going on. It’s missing the point!

John seems to have been this fiery, passionate, probably bull-headed, wild man, who did not really care what anyone thought about him, had no problem offering criticism, and had no problem challenging people and institutions. And that’s why he’s always made me a little uncomfortable. I would guess he probably makes us all a little uncomfortable. He makes us squirm a little bit in our seats when we hear him speak because he wants people’s lives to change, and that will naturally make us a little uncomfortable. He makes me uncomfortable.

I mean, can you imagine having John over as a dinner guest? We’d barely be through the hors d’oeuvres, and I’d have to pull him aside and say, “John, calm down! You’ve already offended everyone in the room! Conservatives, progressives, everyone!”

In verse 7 of our reading, John speaks to the crowds, who have come out to see him in the wilderness. They’ve traveled great distances to see him and be baptized by him, and John says, **“You brood of vipers!”** I mean, what a welcome?! Can you imagine Rob and I starting our Welcome every Sunday morning in a similar way?

Welcome to TPC…you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!”

No one would be here next week!

In Advent, there is a part of me that just doesn’t want John the Baptist because he makes me a little uncomfortable, and I want to sanitize him a little bit each Advent I want to clean him up a little bit.

He’s not really yelling *that* loud… he just has a way of projecting.

He called me a viper, and besides being the killing machines that vipers are, they probably have some positive traits too, right?

And he eats locusts…but there’s a lot of protein in locusts. He needs his protein. It’s part of a balanced diet.

I want to clean him up a little bit because John is threatening…he is. But if we clean him up, and we take away the threat, we will also take away John’s *invitation*, and we need that invitation. In Advent, we need John because he invites us to change. And not just a single moment of change but change as a way of life. John invites us to change *and keep on changing*.

Luke says that John’s baptism was grounded and centered in *repentance*. The word “repentance” is translated from the Greek word Metanoia, which means to change. It means to change your mind and the way that you think. It’s to be open to new ideas and to look at life from new vantage points.

But it’s more than just being open to change on a cognitive level, it’s also changing the way you live and living life in a different way. It has movement to it – it’s to walk in a different direction than you were before. This word, Metanoia, is at the heart of the Gospel – the Good News of God’s Love is *always* inviting us to live in a different way. And Rob and I have often noted that the word “repentance” comes from the Greek word Metanoia because there’s so much baggage to the word “repentance.” Let me be honest, I still hear the word “repent”, and I picture some fire and brimstone preacher shaking’ his finger at me, telling me how bad I’ve been.

Now please don’t get me wrong, there’s a place and a need for confession – we do it every Sunday here and we going to do it next Sunday too – but this word Metanoia, there’s so much more to it. It has so much hope to it and here’s so much potential waiting within it. The possibility for new life and new discoveries and new experiences are oozing out of the word Metanoia.

So as John baptizes people and says, now go and change and live life in a new way, he also says, *go and bear fruits worthy of repentance*. Go and live in a way that shows that change is happening within you. Go and live your lives in a way that reflects the love that has been given to you and showered upon you.

The crowds then ask him, “Okay… then what should we do?”

And here’s where John surprises me. Here’s where this wild and loud and bull-headed man surprises me. John is so passionate and radical that I would expect him to set the bar so high that it’s unattainable to reach, or expect him to say *go and live perfect, sinless lives*. Something impossible, right?! That’s what I would expect, but instead he has the most practical answer. He says,

If you have two coats or extra food, share with someone who needs it.

If you’re a tax collector, he says, don’t cheat people.

To the soldier, he says, don’t abuse your power for financial gain. Be grateful for all that you have.

That’s it. Those are his suggestions. That’s how you live a life worthy of repentance. You serve. You look out for the needs of others, no matter who they are. You care about people. And you let that love and care for other people *change you*. Because that’s what happens when you love and care for people, you are changed.

Which sounds so similar to what Jesus will soon say. Love your neighbor. And by neighbor Jesus means those who are most not like us. Those who have been pushed aside by society. Those whom we might not even understand at all. Jesus says go and move towards your neighbor. Go and build a relationship with your neighbor. Go and listen to your neighbor. Go and look at life from your neighbor’s vantage point.

Because what happens when we do that – when we look at life from our neighbor’s vantage point and from the perspective of someone who is not like us at all…*we are changed*.

When we love our neighbor, we allow the action of loving our neighbor to change us. That’s the beauty of it, it changes us, and the more we keep doing it, the more we are changed and the more we keep learning how to love.

We need John the Baptist, this wild, untamed, passionate, fiery man, who’s in the middle of the desert, yelling and baptizing and telling people to repent. He’s this guy who’s out on the edges of society, and on the edges of religion, but he seems to be pointing us back to the center, and to the original intent, and to the point of it all.

Thanks be to God.