

“What Then Should We Do?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 10, 2021

1st Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 3:1-22

Luke begins this third chapter of his gospel with a time stamp: telling us – at the moment when Jesus is baptized – the names of who was emperor of Rome, governor of Judea, ruler of Galilee, and high priests of Jerusalem. It is not unlike the beginning of the previous chapter, when Luke tells us similar information surrounding the birth of Jesus; allowing us to know the dates of both events; and informing us that – when John appears in the wilderness and Jesus comes to meet him at the River Jordan – they are both around thirty years of age.

But beyond these details about names and ages, Luke is setting up a contrast between one kingdom – controlled by the political and religious leaders of the day – and another realm. Out there, in the wilderness, away from the traditional seats of power, John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. No longer must the people go to the Temple to offer grain and animal sacrifices traditionally prescribed by the rabbis. John – this son of a priest, having taken on the role and persona of a prophet – is establishing a whole new system of worship that removes the barriers separating the people from their God.

Unlike the other gospels, there is no mention here of John wearing camel hair or eating locusts. Luke cares about what John says and where he says it; an echo of Isaiah’s prophecy: “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” The author does not want readers to be distracted by John’s strange looks or diet.¹

“Bear fruits worthy of repentance,” John says to the gathered crowds of people. I don’t know if the meaning of this word *repent* is familiar to you or not. Most often, when we hear it, we think of the wrongs we’ve done to God and our neighbor; things we need to say we are sorry for. We make a list to check off: I was short with my child after I got home from a frustrating day at work. I am sorry. I told a co-worker a half truth about a mistake that I was not proud to admit. I am sorry. We think of this as repentance, but it is too small. Repentance is not just saying you are sorry and then going about life as usual without making any change.

¹ Jerusha Matsen Neal from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The core meaning of *repent* is to turn around; to go in the opposite direction. It means a spiritual, mental, physical transformation. John the Baptizer said to the Jewish people who came out to the wilderness: *do you assume that because you are a descendant of Abraham that you are somehow exempt from repentance? You are not. Bear fruits worthy of repentance.* We, who are created in God's image, who are baptized children of God, who are believers in Jesus; we must repent. We must change.²

To repent is to turn around and go in the opposite direction. To repent is to turn away from complicity with the old age – and its values and behaviors – and to turn toward the coming realm. It is more than just feeling sorry for personal failings. It is making the choice to entrust your life to God and to all who have been created in God's image.

Like me, I'm sure, before this week, whenever you heard news of violence in foreign countries over the election of leaders and of mobs storming government buildings and people dying, you would shake your head in disbelief. You would also give thanks as you reflected on our nation's history and its leaders; that our form of government was set in place by a constitution that sought to establish and sustain justice for all, freedom for all, peace and prosperity for all; flawed as it might have been in its execution, this was our country's ideal.

This week's events of violence, destruction, and death in our nation's capital threaten these ideals that our nation stand for. Over years, we all have witnessed the growing divisions in this country; divisions that have deeply seeded roots. We have felt the growing rage of citizens and leaders. We see first-hand how lies are spread in an effort to create chaos.

How have we gotten here? Even after all the recounts, verifications, and certifications – in courtroom after courtroom and by judge after judge – the results of this election cycle are clear; and yet the lies continue to be spread, believed, and acted upon. These lies have led to violence, destruction, and death. What can be done?

Three times, John's audience asks, "What should we do?" John's answers are telling: they describe the faithful distribution of possessions, the rejection of corruption, and a legal system that refuses to employ violence for its own preservation. It is the people – and not political or religious leaders of the kingdom – that are given the good news of the gospel. And it is indeed good news for those

² John Streccius, "Finding Hope and Promise in Christ"

who have no coat, those who have been cheated out of fair wages, and have been intimidated or beaten by soldiers.

John's message is directed to the people; he is telling them that they do not need to listen to the lies they have heard from those who are in power. The people – those who might have an extra coat, or a job that pays a living wage, or a position that allows them to keep the peace – the people are offered the opportunity to turn away from the old values of violence, untruths, and greed; and, instead, work to create a community of common good.

“What then should we do?” John offers a vision for a new realm where the people will choose to *repent*: not just by saying they are sorry, but by turning in a different direction and transforming their world through concrete actions. In this new realm, the people are exhorted to fairness and against excess: when there is enough to give away, you can share because others around you will be there to pick you up when you come short. Rather than just looking out for themselves, John is encouraging the people to trust God and one another.³

For Luke, God's announcement of Jesus' identity as God's Son was the most significant event of the baptism. We don't even know for certain if John was there; as Luke inserts the reference of John's arrest by Herod for speaking out about an illicit marriage. Jesus was baptized among the people; not apart from them. The voice from heaven declares that Jesus is beloved by God; and that God is well-pleased. In other words, God finds happiness, delight, in Jesus at his baptism; and – I think it is fair to assume – feels the same delight for those who wade into the waters with Jesus. When we live in the manner of Jesus – repenting of the old ways of violence and greed; turning instead to the new ways of peace and fairness and sharing – God is well-pleased.

John uses two images for the coming realm of Jesus in this passage: first, he says that the axe is lying at the root of the trees; and second, John says that the winnowing fork – to separate the wheat from its husk – is in Jesus' hand. Both images assume that – within each of us – there is good and bad: a grove with trees that bear fruit and those that do not; grain that is to be stored for food and chaff that is thrown into the fire. These represent that potential within all of us; we can each be God's delight and happiness, or we can do damage to the common good. In remembering our baptism, we can recall that God creates us, loves us, and calls us to do good. Cleansed in the waters, graced with the Holy Spirit, we can follow in the ways of Jesus, God's Son, who came to tear down the walls that divide us from being in beloved community.

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

The hard work of repentance involves opening our eyes to those who differ from us. It requires seeing the one who has no clothes, or no food, or no companionship, and sharing with them. Not just giving them things but also actively listening, hearing their side of the story, truly seeing them; maybe for the first time. It means demanding accountability for every person who is a part of the community; ourselves included. And it means being open to listen to the fears or frustrations of one another and work for better life for all.

If we truly are to begin to heal as a people – and as a nation – we must be both bold and humble enough to reach out and extend a hand of peace to those who might be dissatisfied or angry; and work together to make changes for the good. To truly repent, we must be honest with ourselves about what we really need and what is excess. Is there something that we are holding back? What would be – for us and others – a fair wage? What can we do in our particular roles to help create or preserve peace?

John understood that his particular role was to prepare the way for the Lord; the one whose sandals, he said, he was not even worthy to untie. John knew that the former kingdom – comprised of emperors, governors, rulers and priests – and the old system – of sacrifice and saying I am sorry – was insufficient. John realized that each person – created in God's image – holds within them the capacity for good, for redemption, for change. So, he called the people to the wilderness and into a baptism of repentance. John knew God loved us enough to send the Son to be a Savior; to usher in a new realm of beloved community.

Let us, therefore, hear John's call to repentance and begin the hard work of healing. Let us open our eyes to the hurt and harm that we have inflicted on one another, whether by striking out or holding back. Let us love one another, listen to each other, care for one another. This is the way that one comes in peace, to be peace for all. Amen.