**What, Then, Should We Do?**

*A Meditation on Luke 3: 7 – 18*

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church December 12, 2021

I was so rebellious when I was in college. It really freaked out my mother. I wasn’t rebellious in the way that you are most likely imagining…what left my mother trembling and fearful was that I was worshipping at a church that wasn’t Presbyterian. I was born into the Presbyterian church, baptized as an infant, confirmed as a youth, and volunteered with the youth group when I was home from college in the summers. I was Presbyterian to the core.

Not only was the church I attended during college NOT Presbyterian, but it wasn’t Methodist or even Episcopal. It was – “**non-denominational.”** I invited my mother to join me one Sunday when she came for a visit. The service lasted *well* over an hour. There were no hymnals. No pews. Worshippers raised their hands in praise. We slipped out when it appeared that the service wasn’t really going to end, but rather open into a time of foot washing. We never talked about it, but I knew she was deeply worried about me! It’s true that the worship was quite different from what she had ever known, but the preaching was solid and life-giving, and I’m sure she could see that. After a few years, my theology continuing to evolve, I needed to move on from that congregation, but every time I read John’s story, I can’t help but connect back to this time in my life. Not because I’m anything like John, but because I wonder what his parents thought about *his* faith journey.

John was even more deeply rooted in his family’s faith tradition than I. He was the son of a priest, the grandson of a priest, a “double PK” (priest’s kid) if you will. His path was to be a priest. *A priest.* In the Temple. Highly respected. Taking his turn to pray, to read from the scrolls, to light the incense as his father did on the day that Gabriel appeared to him. What did Elizabeth and Zechariah think of him when instead of doing what was expected, instead of serving as a priest, he became a *prophet*. Last week we affirmed his parents’ recognition of his calling at the time of his birth. When that calling became a reality, were they still able to embrace it? Did they go out to the wilderness and watch from the edges as he called people “viper spawn”? (I feel them cringing!) Or, possibly, did they welcome his baptism of repentance for themselves? Were Elizabeth and Zechariah divided on what to think, what to do? Did they stay home, worried and increasingly fearful of where this path might take him? Did they have to endure the questions of other priests? The pressure of other priests who came to their door, concerned that John was causing trouble? Did Zechariah have to decide, whether to stand with is son or stand with the Temple? Or were they even alive to witness any of this?

John’s path was much more complex than becoming a priest like his father. A priest is a respectable vocation. A prophet? They might be respected *after* they are gone, not typically honored in their lifetime. Prophets are frightening and unsettling truth tellers. People must be willing to listen long enough to what a prophet has to say that they receive the whole message. Prophets will bring words of hope if you stick around to hear them. We heard from Zephaniah this morning. Beautiful words: *God is in your midst. God will create calm with their love. God will rejoice over you with singing! God will gather all people, giving special care to those who have been discounted or ignored.* And it’s awfully nice for us to just drop into chapter 3 this morning because chapters 1 & 2, aren’t so pretty. They describe God taking action against all creation, a reversal of creation even worse than the flood, the world destroyed by fire. But then God seems to get it out of their system. The anger of a disappointed parent over a child who has forgotten everything they were ever taught – that anger is spent. Done. And God’s word becomes one of reclaiming, of renewing, of restoring ALL peoples. Not just a select few, but all people. Gathered up, welcomed home.

Could that be why John went to the wilderness to offer his preaching? A place where all people could come without fear? No pretenses, no hierarchies as at the Temple. Out in the open, in plain sight. He stood in the wilderness, as prophets before him. He stood at the Jordan River, which would have been for the Jewish people, something we think of as a “thin place,” a place where heaven and earth come so close to one another. The Jordan River represented freedom from oppression and the promise of God to live in covenant relationship with God’s people. Those waters were filled with God’s presence, and John invited people to experience those waters anew. This had to be intentional. John could have preached from a well – as Jesus would do one day – or he could have held a bucket of water or bowl in his hands. He went out to the Jordan and invited people to meet him there. Clean slate. Fresh start. No distractions.

It’s fascinating to me that the people came to him. There must have been any number of reasons: curiosity (those who wanted to go back to the village and gossip about what John was doing), hope (for those who had been disillusioned with the Temple), longing. Look who came. Luke names three groupings: the crowd, the tax collectors and the soldiers. To each he offers instructions that are simple and clear.

To the crowds, he called them out for resting on the promise of their family tree. “To be a descendent of Abraham and Sarah is not enough,” says John. “If no one can recognize you as a family member, if the resemblance has grown so faint because you have forgotten how-to live-in God’s ways, who can save you?”

“What then should we do?” the crowd asks John.

If, as some scholars believe, 90% of the population lived in poverty, we can assume this was probably an impoverished crowd. To them he says, “share.” If you have two shirts, give one of them away. He encourages them to care for one another, to see to one another’s needs. This man, who has nothing of his own, reminds them that to hoard even a little, is to hoard too much. What word is there for you and I in John’s words to the crowd?

This is a brave scene, for along with this crowd there are “evil” tax collectors and “dreaded” soldiers. These groups speak up and ask what they should do. Remember Zacchaeus, the short guy, the tax collector? What if he was in this group? I like to imagine that could be one of the reasons why Jesus came to find him…that over that meal they shared, Jesus said, “Remember when you met my cousin, John, down at the river?” They would have talked about how John said to the Jewish tax collectors, “don’t take extra for yourselves.” And I believe that Zacchaeus took that to heart. That he did change his life at that river bank. By the time Jesus meets him, Zacchaeus is already giving money away to help others, and Jesus does not condemn him, but restores him to a community that has judged him. The truth shall set you free.

And the soldiers…yes, there would have been Jewish soldiers at that time. Jews employed by Rome to keep the peace. Jewish tax collectors and Jewish soldiers would have had so many opportunities to oppress others, to harass others. They could have gotten away with it very easily, lining their pockets and abusing their powers. John invites them into another way of living. He doesn’t tell them to give up their employments, but to be witnesses by living out their vocations in fairness and truth.

There’s a word for each of us. In whatever your calling, you can be a witness. You can be the one who doesn’t succumb to greed, who doesn’t get dazzled by power. For both the tax collectors and the soldiers, this would mean less profit, less comfort. It would require them to turn their focus outward toward their community. This is the call of the prophets since the first prophet’s voice was raised, the call to participate in laboring for peace for all people, dismantling injustices, renewing hope.

As John knew, it begins within the individual heart. What John also knew is that it is God’s work within us. All we have to do is show up at the river, and God takes it from there. God washes us, God renews our souls. God sets our feet on new paths. God empowers us to live lives of which we will not be ashamed.

Do you need to step out into the wilderness? Do you need to wash in the waters of life? Have you asked God, “when then, must I do?” The answers are painfully simple: embrace generosity, personify compassion, embrace integrity, and let mercy guide you. In this way we are co-creators with God in building a home for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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