



Sunday, Jan. 10, 2021
Sermon Series: Love in Action

Love Reorients the Heart
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Luke 3:1-22 NRSV

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. ⁵Every 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; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

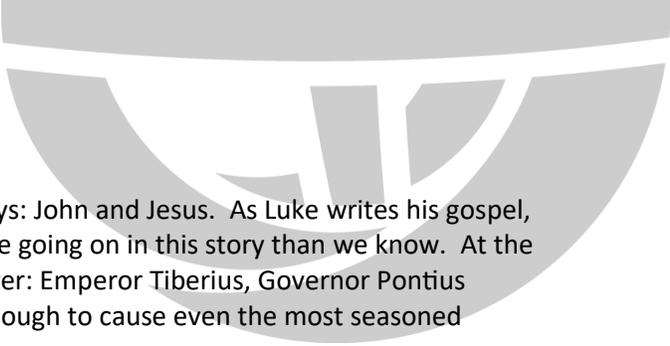
⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor;' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children 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."

¹⁰And 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."

¹⁵As 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."

¹⁸So, 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.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."



Close to thirty years have passed since the births of two little boys: John and Jesus. As Luke writes his gospel, he supplies historical markers, implying that there might be more going on in this story than we know. At the beginning of today's reading, Luke has a long list of those in power: Emperor Tiberius, Governor Pontius Pilate, King Herod, and others too. The names and places are enough to cause even the most seasoned lector to get a bit weak in the knees.

Into this scene of power and influence steps a young man named John. He will eventually be known as John the Baptist. He's hard to miss: wild eyes, tangled hair, and a camel-skin coat. He's the kind of guy you might see on a street corner, and choose to avoid, because you're not sure what he might say and do.

John the Baptist is not on a street corner, mind you, but out in the wilderness. He's acting very much like a prophet. In fact, he's quoting from the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight." It's been a long time – several hundred years – since there's been a prophet in Israel. I suspect there are plenty of folks who doubt if John is legitimate. Still, he finds a place on a ledge and begins to preach. He's in the word business. Unlike Tiberius or Pilate or Herod, he doesn't command armies or sit on a throne. No, he speaks words to the people, and whatever their situation, those words either raise hopes or cut like a knife. That's the thing about words – whether then or now – they have power. They can stir people up. John's words serve as an important reminder: whether prophet, preacher, or politician; whether colleague, family, or friend, we have to be very careful in how we choose our words.

At the heart of John's message, he's calling the people to repent, to change the direction of their lives and turn back to God. And depending on the sincerity of their efforts, John is ready to share a word of forgiveness too. Following Isaiah, not only will the "crooked be made straight and the rough ways made smooth; but all flesh will get a chance to see the salvation of God."

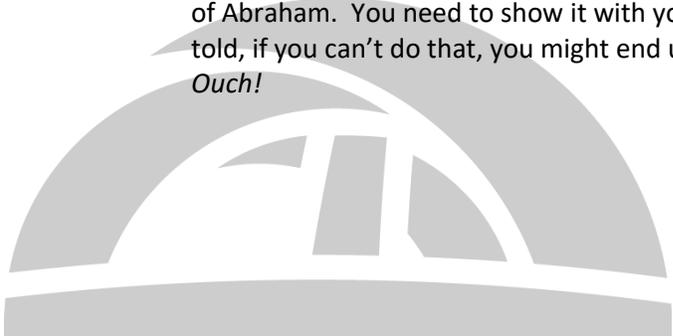
Miya Ponsetta is a 22-year-old woman from the Los Angeles area. Maybe you've been following her story. On December 26 Miya was traveling in New York City when she lost her cell phone. Like many of us who've lost a phone, she panicked. Before long she singled out a 14-year-old black teenager in the lobby of the hotel where she'd been staying. She accused the teen of stealing her phone. Before the incident was over, Miya had screamed at him and tackled him to the ground. A little later came a surprise: the phone showed up at the hotel. It wasn't lost or stolen. IN fact, Miya herself might have left it in an Uber.

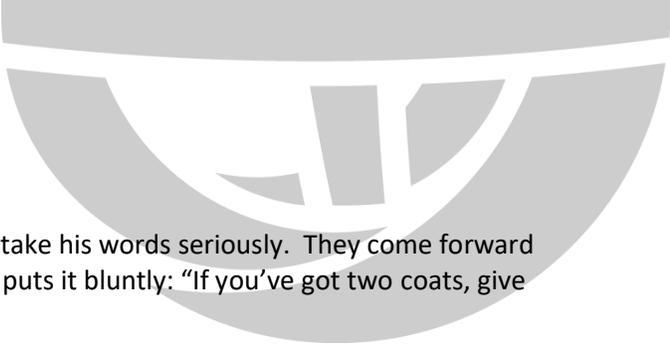
That should clear things up, right? I watched Miya's apology late this week. She was back in California. Her explanation went something like this: "I'm a sweet girl. This is not who I am." She shrugged, "I don't feel like this one mistake should define me. If the boy felt intimidated or got hurt...well...sorry. But what was I supposed to do? I needed my phone! I had to get home!"

So, what do you think, was Miya's apology's sincere? It didn't seem like it to me. Then again, it's probably easier to spot insincerity in others than in ourselves. It's easier to question whether they're genuinely remorseful or simply making excuses.

John the Baptist calls the crowds to a change of heart. I suspect he isn't always sure if people are being sincere either – and he doesn't have security cameras to check. John continues his preaching. He gets more pointed with the people: "If you want to get baptized, don't just make excuses, don't just claim to be children of Abraham. You need to show it with your lives! You need to bear fruits worthy of repentance! Truth be told, if you can't do that, you might end up in the trash bin, a long way from the forgiveness God is offering."

Ouch!





Whether people are convinced if John is a prophet or not, many take his words seriously. They come forward and ask, “If we want to get baptized, what should we do?” John puts it bluntly: “If you’ve got two coats, give one away to someone in need.”

Tax collectors come to be baptized. They ask the same question: “What should we do.” Many in the crowd are stunned to see them – maybe even repulsed. Tax collectors are the lowest of the low, regularly squeezing every last shekel out of folks. Why? Because they get to keep the extra for themselves. Again, John speaks bluntly: “Don’t collect more than what’s fair!”

Soldiers also come to be baptized: “And we, what should we do?” More blunt talk from John: “Quit shaking people down. Use your power for good, not for ill. Be content with your take-home pay.”

Luke gives the impression that the more John preaches, the more open the crowd becomes. Repentance. Reorientation. Taking his words to heart. Maybe he’s a prophet after all. There’s no litmus test, mind you. It’s more a case of: Do his words ring true? And does he bring real and lasting change in the hearts of his listeners? John cries out: “Friends, tax collectors, soldiers, even Miya Ponsetta: Don’t be so concerned about your possessions or money or power or cell phones. Be concerned about preparing the way of the Lord, about making his paths straight.”

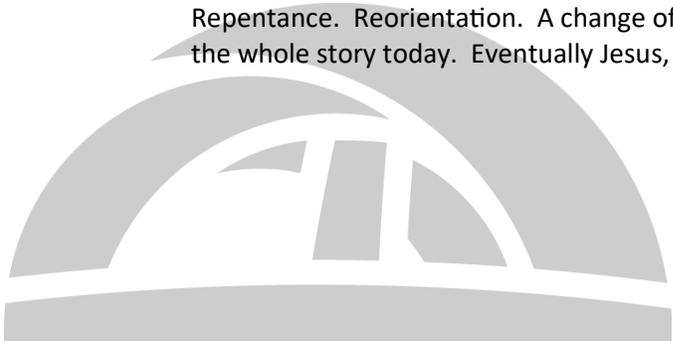
John is riveting. People are getting their hopes up: “Maybe he’s the one we’ve been waiting for, maybe he is the Lord’s Messiah.” John is quick to deflect their adoration: “Someone a lot stronger than me is coming. I’m not even worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. Look for him! He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

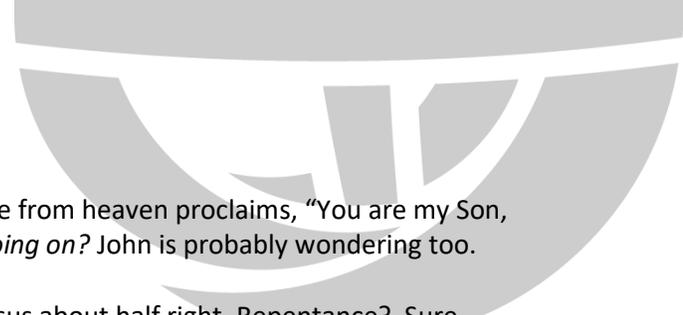
There is power in John’s words. From the sounds of it, he uses those words for good and not for ill. Repentance. Reorientation. A change of heart. And much like the prophets of old, he sometimes speaks truth to those in power, especially when they need to hear it. King Herod is so troubled by John’s words about his brother Philip’s wife that he locks John up in prison. *Enough! I don’t want to hear him anymore!*

Isn’t it interesting what can happen when God gets ahold of someone like John? If they’re ready and willing, God can often use that person for much good. Jan Vetter retired at the end of December. In case you don’t know Jan, she and her husband Rich have been a part of Zumbro for a good long while. Along the way, Jan has been inviting people – a little like John the Baptist, but without the wild eyes and tangled hair – to reorient their hearts and share out of their abundance. Through Jan’s work with Lutheran Social Service’s *Adopt-a-Family Program*, and through her efforts with Olmstead Country’s *Way-to-Give Program*, she not only collected extra coats, but extra couches and chairs, used appliances, even spare tires. Jan and Rich’s garage often had very little room for the cars because she needed the space to mobilize her efforts.

Of course, Jan would be the first to say that these programs were not about her, but about those who joined *with* her. Even so, there was often plenty of “fruits worthy of repentance” in Jan’s garage, abundant opportunities to provide a helping hand to those in need. The fact of the matter is, we often don’t know how to bear fruit on our own. Somebody like Jan is invaluable in leading the way. Thank you, Jan!

Repentance. Reorientation. A change of heart. This sounds like a lot of work, and it probably is. But it’s not the whole story today. Eventually Jesus, the Stronger One, comes to get baptized too. It’s a momentous day.





The heavens open up. The Holy Spirit comes down. And a voice from heaven proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased.” *Amazing! What’s going on?* John is probably wondering too.

I want to go out on a limb here. I think John the Baptist gets Jesus about half right. Repentance? Sure. Reorientation? Sure. A change of heart? Sure. Where John misses the boat, however, is in the love department. Jesus doesn’t come simply to condemn. He doesn’t come simply to rain down fire and brimstone. He sometimes speaks hard words too, but ultimately he comes to refashion your heart and mine through the power of love.

That’s the word from heaven for Jesus: *Beloved*. That’s the word for us too. It might sound wonderful, but is it? Rachel Held Evans writes: “The great struggle of the Christian life is to take God’s name for us, to believe we are beloved, and to believe that is enough.”

We hear a story like John the Baptist, and of the need to reorient our lives, and it’s easy to think: We’ll be children of God *when and only when...we get our act together; when our apology sounds more sincere; when we believe without doubt; when we beat the addiction; when we give away half our clothes and maybe the microwave too*. Oh, repentance can be a very hard – indeed, lifelong – thing to do. So, does God’s love for us come freely and graciously or do we somehow have to deserve it first? Again, can we believe we are beloved and it’s enough to start there? Can we humbly admit that always, always, we will be a work in progress?

Please hear me: Considering the deeply troubling events in Washington this past week, our hearts are saddened. They should be! We have a long list of those in power: Trump, Biden, McConnell, Pelosi. There’s It’s easy to point fingers. There’s definitely a place for John’s prophetic message to those in power. Words stir people up, and sometimes for ill and not for good. Actions have consequences. Wrong has been done. Too often apologies – if there’s been an apology at all – have sounded more like Miya Ponsetta than anything remotely sincere. *What’s wrong with our nation?*

Even as I say this, however, I think we need to spend a lot less time on our phone or TV and a lot more time on our knees. John’s word is not just for those in power. It’s for all of us. For the rebuilding of our common good, for the healing of our nation, we must do some soul searching. And it starts with us: How can we listen better? How can our hearts be changed? What can we do to build bridges of understanding and peace?

Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, John cries. It’s not only for our leaders in Washington, or for those who vote differently than us, or for the angry mob who stormed the capital. It’s for you and me too. Repentance. Reorientation. A change of heart. Admit it: we are always a work in progress! John’s words can raise our hopes or cut like a knife. We need them!

But never forget, the Stronger One is coming – indeed, he’s already here – the one called Beloved. He calls us to follow. He’ll have hard words for us too, but also words of transforming love. *May the crooked be made straight and the rough places made smooth. May all flesh come to see the salvation of God.*

The great struggle of our Christian life is to take God’s name for us, to believe we are beloved, and to believe that is enough of a place to start. God help us! We so need it! Amen.

