

## Jan 10 Sermon – John the Baptist; Luke 3:1-22

It has been a tough year to be a preacher. Metaphorically speaking, the fires of hell could be kept burning by all the sermons begun or even finished that needed to be ripped up and started over because of some new crisis.

I'm rather grateful I'm kind of a last minute sermon writer.

Although the gospel message is always the same no matter what is going on, thinking through how it plays out in our own context matters. This past year, that context seems to change not only week to week, but day to day.

Today is the Baptism of Jesus. Unlike the other gospels, Luke makes less of that than he does the ministry of John the Baptist. That's actually not a bad thing given our current context, because John is, shall we say brutally honest.

On the Sunday when we read about Jesus' baptism, we often take the opportunity to affirm our own baptism.

We will actually include that a little later as part of this morning's message. A renunciation of evil is part of the affirmation of baptism. And boy do we need that right now.

But first, let's work our way through John's ministry and what it, and Jesus' baptism, have to say in our current situation.

John is the last of the Old Testament style prophets. Like the Old Testament prophetic books, Luke provides great detail to help us situate this in history.

The next part of the prophetic formula is the phrase "the word of God came to John."

We read from several Old testament prophets during the weeks leading up to Christmas...Isaiah...Jeremiah...Ezekiel...Joel. They all start out pretty much the same way.

So what is the job of a prophet?

There are two. The first is to announce God's judgment. Prophets are called to illuminate all the ways the people are failing in their covenant with God. They point out all the ways a society is failing to be the beloved community God envisioned. And they let the people know God is not happy about it.

The purpose of all that is to get people to repent...to change their way of life...to return to the God way of life. That repentance is how we prepare for the coming of the Lord.

The second job of a prophet is to proclaim God's promise of forgiveness, salvation and a new start.

John's got this prophet job down. He starts with judgment.

You brood of vipers! he says. Don't count on your heritage or the circumstances of your birth to save you! You are called to bear fruit that will be a blessing to the world! Are you doing it?

John's baptism of repentance plunges the people into the cold water of judgment and wakes them up.

It's a classic call to repentance.

And it works!

What shall we do? the people ask.

Then John tells them what this repentance should look like – honestly it's pretty much the same as it was for all the old testament prophets. It's mostly about how God's people should treat each other...and especially how they should treat the most powerless and vulnerable.

John answers them, Create a more equitable world that gives the poor what they need...don't let greed rule the day...and for soldiers, who were basically serving as law enforcement, be fair. Don't make threats or false accusations to extract money from people. Don't let your position of power lead you to take advantage of the powerless.

And then John makes the promise – there is one coming who will do way more than I. I baptize you and call you to repent and change your way of life.

He will baptize you with the holy spirit and fire.

The one coming after me will truly transform. He will burn off the chaff in you and his Spirit will empower you to bear fruit for a world in pain.

But we can't be open to that transformation unless we're willing to look at what's wrong.

That's what repentance does for us. And honestly, repentance isn't so much something we do as a gift given to us – a painful gift, but a gift. On our own we are typically blind to the ways in which we are wrong. And without a diagnosis, there's no treatment.

This past week would have been unbelievable, if it hadn't been for the fact we've had so many unbelievable weeks this past year...and for the fact that there have been signs pointing to it for a long time.

I think that we are beyond being able to heal the divisions and hostilities in this nation on our own. I don't know how to stop Q anon type conspiracy theories from having so much influence. And as much as I'd like unity, there are some demons we need God to cast out before that can happen.

So, with the crowd at the Jordan, we ask "what shall we do?" John does offer some non-negotiables.

What are those non-negotiables for us? When we ask what shall we do, what would the answers be?

They are the same. They are the same as they were for the crowd listening to John. They are the same as they were to the people who listened to Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Joel, and Amos and all the other prophets.

We love and care for one another, and we especially care for those at the bottom of whatever heap they've been thrown into.

We work to create a more equitable world where the poor have what they need. We appreciate and try to heal the trauma that makes it hard for people to make good choices. We ask how our systems and policies make it hard for people to ever break out of poverty.

We recognize that a world in which some are billionaires and some are starving is totally the opposite of what God wants.

We become willing to ask hard questions of ourselves and our society – why are prisons disproportionately filled with black and brown people? Why does race still affect health outcomes? How do historical practices where race and economics are concerned continue to hurt people?

We frame contentious issues in a way that truly does value all lives – black, white, or brown; born or unborn; blue collar or white collar; rich or poor; immigrant, native, citizen or non-citizen; gay or straight...Christian or non-Christian; sex worker or corporate CEO...the list goes on.

And after seeing some of the images from Wednesday, for the love of God, for the love of all that's sacred...for the sake of a world God loves dearly...if you find that you are cheering on the same side as increasingly vocal and empowered white supremacists and Christian nationalists, it's time to ask yourself some really hard questions about your political stances

and the candidates you support. Because there is no room in God's kingdom for white supremacy.

We are in a time of judgment for our country...we are being called to repent. We are being called to the humility it takes to see where we are wrong.

We won't stay there forever – we have the promise of John and all the other prophets...we have the promise of Jesus and his body and blood given for us for forgiveness and salvation.

But I believe right now we need to sit with the judgment and with the call to repent. We need to renounce the evil that still keeps us bound and that still hurts the most vulnerable.

Jesus' baptism is just a snippet at the end of Luke's account. But it's important for today's message. In our baptism we too received that same spirit that empowers...we too received those words from God – you are my beloved child.

It's time we learn what that means.

At this point, we will continue with the Affirmation of Baptism by the Assembly which will begin with a robust renunciation of evil. I would invite you to unmute to offer your responses.

People of God, We are born children of a fallen humanity; by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ. Living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.

I ask you to profess your faith in Christ Jesus, reject sin, and confess the faith of the church. After each of the following questions, your response is "I renounce them."

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?

Do you renounce the forces of evil that lead to white supremacy?

Do you renounce the forces of evil that cause us to see any other person or group of people as less than human or unworthy of love and care?

Do you renounce the forces of evil that lead you to doubt that you are anything other than a beloved child of God?

Do you renounce the forces of evil that lead to sexual exploitation of vulnerable people?

Do you renounce the forces of evil that lead the powerful to invoke the name of God for unjust purposes?

Do you renounce the forces that tempt you to rebel against God?

I would invite you to join me as we confess our faith with the Apostle's Creed.

Creed

You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:

To live among God's faithful people;

To hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper ,

To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,

To serve all people, following the example of Jesus,

And to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?

If so say I do, and I ask God to help and guide me.

People of God do you promise to support and pray for one another in your live in Christ?

If so, say we do and we ask God to help and guide us.

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