

January 10, 2016  
Luke 3:10-22  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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*Baptism for Change*

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

In today's scripture reading we encounter a familiar theme - the Spirit moving in an unexpected place through an unexpected person.

Chapter three in Luke's gospel begins with a recounting of political and religious leaders of the day:

*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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,*

Surely God would work wonders through one of them.  
But NO,

*the word of God came to John son of Zechariah,*

Where? In the palace? In the temple?  
NO,

*in the wilderness.*

And what is his message?

*Repentance.*

So what do the people have to say?  
Let's listen.

SERMON

Today we have shared in the celebration of baptism with two of our confirmation youth. If we were in the congregation where I served as student pastor when I was in seminary these two would likely have been immersed in the baptismal pool that is behind the pulpit in that sanctuary.

You see that congregation is both United Church of Christ and American Baptist. Both groups have a ritual of celebration when a child is little and another when a youth is on the cusp between childhood and adulthood. The difference is when the powerful symbol of water is involved.

For those in the Baptist tradition, there is usually a service of dedication for infants in which you celebrate God's love for the child and the congregation makes promises to share the life of faith with the child. However, they wait until children are old enough to make the decision on their own to share the waters of baptism. In the UCC we are open to baptism at any age. I've baptized someone who was only 6 days old all the way to someone who was in her 90s.

Our confirmation experience is an opportunity for youth to make the decision to affirm their baptisms (if they

were baptized as infants) and thus to accept responsibility for their own faith journey.

John the Baptist spoke to that youth and adult experience of reflecting on one's life from a spiritual perspective and making decisions about what kind of a life you will live.

Like his cousin Jesus, John worked outside the religious power structure of his day. In fact he challenged it. The Jewish community of their day was quite different than it is today. The Jewish community today is gathered in congregations, much like we are. They study Torah, engage in service, and seek to be faithful to God. In 1st century Palestine, however, the practice of Jewish faith was focused on the temple in Jerusalem. The life of devotion, including practices of repentance and forgiveness, revolved around animal sacrifice in the temple.

This was big business. People had to raise the animals to be sacrificed. People had to change the money from Roman coins (everyday money) to Jewish coins so people could purchase the animals. The priesthood lived off the animals that were sacrificed. Indeed it was big business. Of course, the problem is not everyone can afford to participate. So does that mean they cannot be forgiven? John the Baptist says no.

John's actions remind me of Martin Luther who protested the selling of indulgences for forgiveness that was big business for the Catholic Church in the 1500s and led to the Protestant

Reformation. Just as Martin Luther protested the selling of forgiveness in his day, John the Baptist did so in his day.

Effectively, both of them, each in his own time, pointed out the obvious that the religious establishment is not meant to be a barrier, or even a gatekeeper, between God and the people. The Spirit is always on the move.

So, John invited people into the waters of the Jordan. By his actions he was implying that you didn't have to go to the temple. Most likely, many of these people couldn't afford to go to the temple, or who weren't welcome in the temple.

All four gospels say something about Jesus' baptism, but only in the gospel of Luke do we hear a conversation between John and the crowd. It's a fascinating conversation. John was not simply offering forgiveness. He speaks of a baptism of repentance. Repentance means to turn around, to make a change in direction. It's not about magical words it's about faithful action. For John it is when we repent, when we change our actions to be faith-full, that we experience forgiveness of sins. The waters of baptism are a cleansing for a new life.

The crowd gets it and says to John, "What then should we do?"

I think from my childhood church experience I would have expected him to say, "No drinking, No smoking, No swearing, No sex."

But that's not his focus. John is less concerned with personal piety than he is with communal well-being. John tells them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." He's talking economics.

The text goes on to say that tax collectors and Roman soldiers also ask him what they should do. Now neither of these groups would be well accepted in the temple. In fact the Romans are of another tradition all together. But he doesn't turn either of them aside. He speaks to them also about economic justice and tells them not to cheat or extort money from others.

For John, baptism is not simply a question of whether or not we are right with God, but also whether or not we are right with our neighbors. In fact being right with God involves being right with our neighbors.

Engaging the journey of faith means engaging the world around us in all its complexity and messiness.

It means addressing the racial and gender divides that are so deeply woven into our culture that sometimes we struggle to even see them. Some Bowdoin students are reporting both racial and gender harassment when they come downtown.

It means addressing the deep economic despair of some of our neighbors, who in spite of a so called economic recovery are falling further and further behind. Most of the manufactory base that used to be part of Maine's economy is gone.

People aren't looking for charity they are looking for good jobs.

It means addressing the profound personal challenges of addictions, especially, at the moment, opiate addictions. Such problems send seismic shocks through families and communities.

We are dealing with all these issues right here in Brunswick.

A few weeks ago Margo Knight and Ken Thorson, from our Church Council, and I went to a gathering at the town office. It was a gathering of representatives from various organizations in town to talk about the life of our community. One of the topics that was discussed in various ways but was finally put into words by one of the people there was, "We have to talk about the growing divide between the haves and have nots in our community."

In his ministry John the Baptist addressed that divide from a spiritual perspective, offering the call of God and the grace of God to all the people.

As he said, he was preparing the way for the one in whose way we would experience the Spirit for new and renewed life. Thanks be to God.