

Luke 3:1-18

Close to Home: A Home for all (Joy)ⁱ

Third Sunday of Advent ~ December 12, 2021

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Sermon:

And, by the way, you "Brood of Vipers" ... Merry Christmas!!

You may be checking your bulletin: "Wait, wasn't this supposed to be "Joy Sunday," with the pink candle and all? So, what's joyful about this intense fuming, ranting fired-up preacher, John. Only last Sunday we were enjoying cute miracle baby-John: just eight days old, with daddy Zachariah blessing Johnnie boy, and everyone "ooing" and "aahing" over him? Remember how neighbors and relatives were asking, "What then will this child become?"

Well, *we* only had to wait 8 days to find out: he became wild and wooly prophet John the Baptist, out there in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance. Telling everyone to repent now, not later. John was preparing the way of the Lord urgently, with words that may have felt like an axe poised to land on them, if they failed to do something, but what?

To their credit, the crowds that came out to be baptized asked exactly the right question: *What then should we do?* They didn't try to point a finger at "those other people". They didn't try to justify themselves, rationalizing how they really had the best of intentions. No. In that moment they asked the right and sacred question that God longs to hear from all of us: "What then should *we* do?" In that simple five-word question, they were both taking responsibility for their actions and were signaling their readiness to take bold steps to act differently.

And cut-to-the-chase, spare-the-niceties-John, told them what to do. Exactly. *Stop, stop, share.* Stop using your privilege and power to get all that you can for you and yours. Stop extorting and extracting. Stop doing the things that you are doing to block the healing path of God's salvation for *all* flesh. And start by sharing whatever you have with those in need. Stop, stop, share. That is how all flesh will start to see how the power of Divine Love is here to save us all.

In preparing the way, in clearing the path: John was *already* preaching the gospel, the message of Christ. The Good News: plain and simple: the grace of God is pure gift. We cannot earn this pearl of great price. Our call is to say "yes" to the blessing. Our call is to repent, and to turn, so we can see this gift of grace. But here's the thing: That turn must turn into something. We must "bear fruits worthy of repentance," or else the first turn is worthless, powerless, and means nothing. Perhaps John left it all on the field that day, because he knew that his gospel message which he preached full strength to anyone and everyone, up to and including Herod, full strength, would cost him his life.

John's clarity inspires me to aspire to the same. Let's break down just what he was telling them to "stop, stop, share" that day that was so precisely pinpointed by Luke in verses 1-2. To all of them, John tells them to stop sinning the sin of presumption. The sin of thinking we're "better than those people, we've got this covered, no reason to really change our behavior." For this

crowd, it was the sin of "chosen people privilege." "We have Abraham as our ancestor." For us here today, it would be like saying or thinking, "we're fine. We can chill because we've got Jesus as our savior." And John would say: your turn must turn into something. Repentance cannot be an abstraction for John the Baptist. He would tell us to take concrete actions that clear the path. Prepare the way: level those mountains of judgment and presumption; fill those valleys of want, despair and desolation. Help those who are living "rough" to smooth sailing. Whatever is blocking the way for "ALL flesh to see the salvation of God." (Luke 3:6) Whatever is obstructing the path for anyone and everyone to know deep in their heart that they are beloved in God's eyes.

To really live from this truth shifts the ground within and beneath us. It starts with the geography within one's individual spirit. And spirals out like rings of water on a lake when a fish jumps. To live and move and have our being according that everyone is equally worthy and loved, threatens the status quo. John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ knew that everything they said and did was not only personal but also political. That is why they both were killed, struck down by the political power structure of their time, the Roman Empire. Sharing our coat is an individual decision, an individual turn to begin with. But it also has economic consequences. It's a call to push back against an economy that tells us that more is better, that new is better than old. A system that tells us to keep buying, buying and acquiring. The call to share half of what you have pushes back against this strong tide. Can we trust that we don't need a back-up coat?

Think about the economic consequences of what the tax collector and the soldier were told to do by John. For the tax collector, to stop collecting kick-backs would be a turn away from the standard of the corrupt industry at the time. For the soldier, to stop extorting money meant decreasing his take home pay, and refusing to say "yes" to the lies and corruption within the ranks of the system he was a part of. I think it is important to point out that John did *not* tell them to quit their jobs. To stop being a tax collector or to stop being a soldier. Rather, he told them to start doing their job right, no matter the cost to them individually. Yes, he was essentially calling them to transform the system of which they were a part. One decision at a time.

What about that message here and now in our precise location zip code 54449 in December of 2021? The valley of food insecurity is real and persistent right here in our town and the towns surrounding Marshfield. This very weekend, through the United Way's NOW, Nutrition On Weekends, 420 children in Marshfield and surrounding towns have nutritious food that was packed for them to help lift them out of the valley of hunger between Friday and Monday. I learned from Ali Luedtke, the NOW Coordinator, at Rotary this week that prior to COVID, the need was less, 355 children. But it has grown by leaps and bounds in the past year. Here at FPC we are one of the many faith communities and community partners who support NOW through packing the food and donations.

We have plenty of people facing high mountains right here in our congregation and our community. What am I talking about? After we have had a joint replacement or orthopedic surgery, just walking across one's bedroom can seem as difficult as summiting Mt. Everest. The

valley of pain, the loss of functionality tests our moxie and our faith. The Voice in the wilderness called to us here at FPC, beginning with a few wheelchair and walker requests about 4- 5 years ago to build a community outreach ministry that lends medical equipment free of charge to anyone who requests. To the question, "What then should we do?" God made it clear to us that we were being called to share medical equipment that would help make the rough ways smooth, one step, one trip to the bathroom, at a time. This excerpt from our most recent monthly Parish Nurse Report, written by the leader of this ministry Nadene Lautenschlager tells the story best:

Amazing basically sums up the activity in the loan closet this month. There were at least 3 times that a needed item was returned just in time for or the same day as someone called asking for that particular item. I am a true believer that God does take care of things and this month has just reinforced that belief. We also were able to provide all the equipment needed to allow a mother to come to Marshfield for Thanksgiving weekend and enjoy time with her family... We are presently serving 92 people with 123 pieces of equipment. There were 21 unique encounters for sending items out and receiving returned equipment. We continue to receive many very positive comments about having this service available. --Nadene Lautenschlager

The valley of pain and suffering, of loss and wounding is one we all walk. Our wounds are different. The mountains we don't think we can climb are unique. Yet Jesus walked the lonesome valley for us. And still does. At the climax of Thornton Wilder's short play, *"The Angel that Troubled the Waters,"* the Angel tells the Newcomer, a physician who appears to be fine and dandy, but who admits honestly to the angel how desperately wounded he is inside, saying, "Surely you are not deceived by my apparent wholeness. Your eyes can see the nets in which my wings are caught." To which the angel replies: "Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve."ⁱⁱ Friends, we worship a wounded healer savior who calls us to claim the truth in the angel's question, "Without your wound, where would your power be?" What then should we do? *Stop* pretending we are perfect. *Stop* seeking power in acquisition. *Share* what we are given in abundance: the mercy and grace of Christ.

I am going to take a wild guess and suggest that at 7:20 P.M. tonight, I know what many in this room and online will be doing. Yes, you will be watching the Green Bay Packers kick off their game against the Chicago Bears. Tonight, they have the opportunity to clinch their playoff spot. Sports writer Paul Bretl, suggests that, "in addition to rooting for the Jets and Bengals, we also want to see the Los Angeles Rams beat Arizona, and it wouldn't be a bad thing to root for Buffalo over Tampa Bay either. However, the gospel according to Matt LeFleur, clears the field of vision for us with what he said on Monday, "I think if you start focusing on things outside of your control or outside of your football team, you're not 100 percent focused on the challenges that lie ahead for your team. We just gotta take care of our business and whatever happens in those other games, that's the way it rolls. We have many tough challenges in front of us, starting

with Chicago, and just gotta make sure that we continually get better each week prior to whatever lies at the end of this thing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Has Packers Coach Matt LeFleur been listening to John the Baptist’ sermon in Luke 3? Don’t presume, make room, don’t blame, instead claim the space and time God is giving you. Don’t try to manage the other teams. Play your position with all your heart, mind and strength. And you will prepare the way, every day, so that others and you: all flesh will see the Light and ultimate power of God’s redeeming Love. The more we do this, the closer to home we will be. The more we do this, the closer to home, the closer to God’s kingdom our world will be.

One of our own made it all the way home on Friday morning this week. She had a longer journey here on this earth than most of us, 102 years. More years, more mountains and valleys to summit and traverse than she or any of us could bargain for. I am speaking of Bonnie Babler, who made it to her eternal home and joined the church triumphant two days ago. Thanks be to God for her life and witness. When I entered her room at the House of the Dove on Thursday afternoon, Bonnie’s eyes were wide open, her body was relaxed, and she was even responding with a few sounds and with her warm, loving eyes. She seemed to know her days on earth were soon to end. She gazed at the illuminated wall Christmas tree decoration her dear friend and faithful, loving caregiver, Carolyn Opitz, had put on her wall precisely where she could see it from her bed.

This very tree, I just learned yesterday, has been on the wall accompanying many of our now dearly departed church family members. More than Carolyn could name. It seemed that Bonnie was looking at it and beyond it, to the Eternal Light, beckoning. That night, after three days of consuming no food or drinking any way water, she sat up and ate a bowl of ice cream. Earlier that afternoon, I had shared the words from Paul in Philippians 4, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice...do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” A lifelong lover of pie and ice cream, she was enjoying the joy of the presence of the Lord in that taste of heaven on earth, just before she made her journey home.

For us here today, still on earth, I will end with this: The joy of the Lord is the journey with Christ, let come what may. We are never alone. What then shall we do? Stop, stop, share that *all* flesh may see.

ⁱ The sermon theme series, “Close to Home” and this sermon title was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Thornton Wilder, “The Angel That Troubled the Waters,” *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder*, Vol. I, edited by Tappan Wilder, (Theater Communications Group: New York, NY, 1998), pp.74-75.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://dairylandexpress.com/2021/12/11/green-bay-packers-opportunity-clinch-playoff-spot-bears/>