

Desert Journeys

Zephaniah 3: 14-20; Luke 3: 7-18

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I. Introduction

I love baptisms. One of my very favorite things to do in the church. And I ran across a story this week -- a baptism that happened in about 445 CE after St. Patrick had been made Bishop of Ireland. So, he was traveling all over Ireland converting the people and he in his journeys came to the Kingdom of Munster, where he met the king of the land whose name was Óengus. Now Óengus had heard about Christianity and he was eager to be part of it. And so, he came to the saint and he asked St. Patrick to baptize him. And St. Patrick was of course very excited to do that. And bishops, as you all know, get to carry that cool staff that comes out of shepherding tradition, we call it a crozier. And in the good, old days, it used to end in a very sharp, hard, iron point, so that if you're a bishop and you were preaching out in the fields like St. Patrick was, you could stick it in the ground and it would stand there while you were preaching.

So, St. Patrick was apparently a little nervous but according to the tradition, as he's getting ready to baptize King Óengus, he sticks his crozier down right into the king's foot and didn't pay attention to that until he happened to glance down and saw a pool of blood there. Well, St. Patrick was mortified, of course, and he apologized to the king and asked the king why he hadn't said something, and the king said, "I just assumed it was part of the ritual."

Now listening to John the Baptist talk about baptism, you might expect that it is a painful ritual because John's language in this passage that we have in our lectionary text today is very fraught, heavy language. I mean, just from the beginning, as people are approaching him for baptism, he calls them "a brood of vipers," which of course I don't think happened at all when you all came, right? And he talks immediately about the wrath to come and the ax is laid at the root of the tree, and all of the language is just very fraught and heavy. But then Luke ends this passage with this very interesting phrase, he says, "And John continued to preach the good news to them." Well, it's an odd perspective on what good news sounds like. But Luke's point, of course, is that this whole process of baptism is a process of calling people out of a way of life that no longer works and into a family and a way of life that is transformative and life giving, and that is good news, that baptism is always about our response to God's graciousness in our lives, which is why our church places this passage on the third Sunday of Advent, which is this Sunday we celebrate joy, because it is about the joy of God's reaching out to us and our being empowered to respond to that grace.

II. Outward and Visible Sign

Now John's teachings about baptism I think have some helpful things to say to us today because we wrestle with some of the same things that John's community was wrestling

with as well. The people who were coming to John in the desert were largely from the Jewish community, so they brought with them this sense of call and of being set aside as God's people. They knew that they had strayed and they figured that this ritual of baptism would help set them right and on the right path. But John is very clear that their status as children of Israel, and he is very clear by analogy with us, that our status as Christians does not set us right with God. He's also very clear that this ritual of baptism is not a magical act in which they will be set right with God. It is a sign of a change that is going to happen in their hearts, and it's a change that then needs to be lived out if it's going to be meaningful and effective.

Now this is an important point for us because a lot of us carry a sort of magical sense of what baptism consists of. And that's easy to understand because for centuries the church taught us that we needed to baptize infants very quickly because in an age of high infant mortality if a child died before they were baptized, the theology said they'd still died with original sin on them and therefore could not move immediately into heaven, they went to limbo. What's interesting, of course, is that that's never been part of Protestant tradition and even in Roman Catholic tradition limbo was closed a number of years ago -- no, seriously, it was. There was an official doctrine, a change in the official doctrine -- and we don't believe that our original sin contaminates children such that they can't enter heaven. But there's still this idea that I think is just ingrained in our DNA that we've got to get kids baptized right away because there's something magic that happens.

Now it feels magic. There is a very sacred moment in the act of baptizing someone. But I am not doing magic when I do that. And we see in the church all the time that people will come by our church because it's a big, glorious church and they'll come in and they'll say, "Can I have my child baptized?" even though they're not part of the church, don't plan on being part of the church, and again I never called them a brood of vipers, but we do have a John the Baptist conversation which is to say that baptism is not magic and that what is important about baptism is in our very traditional Methodist language, that it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In other words, it is signifying that something has changed in a person's life. And if that's not changing, then a baptism is really just a show.

III. Living Baptism

So, what is it that John says needs to change for this transformation to start to happen? John gives us a couple of helpful pieces of advice that I want to share with you, and they're I think particularly pertinent during the Christmas season. A lot of the prophets of the scriptures, particularly the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, talk about sin as you all know in a very large, global sense of the structures of sinfulness of our society, and we spend a lot of time talking about that obviously here in our Metropolitan community. John's perspective however was a very personal one and he starts talking immediately to the individuals who are coming to him about changes they can make in their personal lives that are going to be transforming and that are going to show how they are living out of this new relationship that they have with God. The first thing that

he says to them when they say, "What do we do now?" is he says if you've got two coats, give one to somebody who doesn't have one. And if you've got more food than you need to eat, share it with somebody who has less than they need to eat. So, John starts off right away with this radical vision of how we share our resources with one another.

This is a really, really important thing for us to reflect on as we again move quickly towards Christmas and are all caught up in this buying frenzy that we do in our country. And it's easy to get caught up in that, I get that totally. Jeannine will tell you that when we met I only owned one coat because I was trying to take this passage very, very seriously. And when I bought a new coat for our honeymoon, it was frankly a bit of a moral crisis for me. I melted down a little. But in reality, the third and fourth coat had not been nearly as hard. Because we fall into these habits of caring for ourselves so well.

I don't know if any of you like me are Amazon Prime members, but if I go to Amazon Prime to buy something for a Christmas present, Amazon always kindly invites me to pick up a little something extra for myself. Right? Isn't that nice?

So, we fall into these habits of spending fairly lavishly frankly on ourselves and on the people we love, most of us and most of those people don't really need frankly the things that we're buying for them. Amen? And John's reminder is that part of living out of who we are, part of living out of our baptismal covenant, part of being a part of this community of faith that we join when we get baptized is that we use our resources differently, and that if you have two coats, you don't need another coat but somebody does so you've got to find out who that person is and get them a coat.

And I want to just suggest again that we've got a lot of opportunities to do that as a community of faith. Our church staff this week decided that rather than give each other presents, which we don't need, we're going to collect all that money and we're going to buy some gift certificates for the men and women in our two shelters. That felt like a better use of our resources. Right outside the hall here when you exit the sanctuary to get a cup of coffee, you'll find the UMW, United Methodist Women, have a table for alternative giving where you can honor somebody and celebrate them and show them that you love them not by buying them something that frankly they probably don't need and may never use but by something for someone who does need it and sharing that good news with them. That's a great way to honor the people that we love and care about is what John calls to think about as we use our resources.

John then is asked by the tax collectors and the soldiers, "What do we do?" And the reason these groups of people ask is because in John's world the two of them, those two classes of people, largely made their living by exploiting other people. It was just the standard way of operating. If you were a tax collector, you bid on that position to the government by telling the government how much you thought you could get them in taxes for a particular area, and then you charge more and you lived off the difference. That was how tax collectors made their money. Soldiers, likewise, in John's world were

paid a pretty meager salary but were expected that they would make that up by squeezing the people in the area that they were in charge of.

And what John does, which is interesting, he doesn't condemn the system for its in-built injustices, which many other prophets do, but John says to the people who were engaged in that, "Okay. Here is the system we've got, so you've got to engage that in a different sort of way than all the other people around you. You've got to do what you're doing with meticulous integrity, not exploiting the people that frankly expect you to exploit them but by living in a different sort of way." I think that's a helpful word for us because what it says is holy living is not about setting ourselves apart in a monastic sort of sense, it's not about only doing work that is church work. John's word to us is whatever you are doing, whatever your career is, whatever you spend your time doing, you can do it out of this new sense of who you are as a child of God. You can do your work with absolute integrity and faithfulness and honesty and in a way that builds up the broader community.

The third thing that John doesn't explicitly say but is implicit in a lot of the conversation and is explicit in the baptismal ceremony that we just engaged in and the new member joining is that part of the way we live out of his new covenant is as we welcome in new members into the family of God. Now, that happens on a broad global scale obviously, and we talked a couple of weeks ago about our sacred obligation to welcome in refugees who are coming to our country in need but it's also got a very personal intimate expression in how we live out our life as a family, church family here, so that there are many people who are refugees from other churches who find their way here because their church experience has been so painful and alienating for whatever reason, and part of our call here is to create a family in which all of those church refugees are welcomed and celebrated. So that we just pledged to help raise Isabel with her parents and we promised Ben and Holly and Rita and Natalie and Jeff that we are going to nurture them in their life with God. So, guess what? That means that at the end of the service, you can't bolt down to get coffee and ignore all of them, right? They're family now. And our role is to welcome them into the family, celebrate them and support their growth as disciples. Our call to radical hospitality in our church is to make sure that everybody who comes through the door here regardless of where they come from and who they are and what their past church experience is is that they find family here. That's what it means to live out of our baptismal covenant.

IV. Conclusion

So, the Jews who came to the desert to receive baptism from John knew that something was wrong in their life, they knew that something was missing, and they journeyed to the desert to try to set that right through this wondrous ritual of baptism. John reminded them and reminds us that those vows that we take, that that sacred moment of baptism is a sign towards a different kind of living. The ritual itself is glorious and sacred but does not change anything unless it starts to change in here.

Amen.