

“Kinfolk: Cousin John”

Scripture: Luke 3:1-17

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 12/6/09 (8:45 a.m. service)

With the Lessons and Carols service planned for the 11:00 a.m. service, I had reach the conclusion that I did not have to preach this Sunday. Then on Wednesday, I was struck by the realization—there will be an 8:45 a.m. service! There will be a worshiping congregation ready for a sermon. So, although it is a general rule of public speaking never to begin with an apology, I am breaking that rule this morning. What we have this morning is an “almost-finished” sermon. I am inviting you this morning to help me finish the sermon. Let’s see if we can finish the sermon together. In five moves through the text for today, we will complete what is still unfinished. And, I thank you in advance for your help in this endeavor.

Move 1:

3 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, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

In every age, there are important folks—presidents, CEOs, high “mucky-tee-mucks.” What is astonishing is how often God avoids the high places and works in the low places. That’s what this introduction in the Gospel of Luke says about John the Baptist. There were emperors, governors, rulers, and high priests...and then there was John, the son of Zechariah. Not only is this John a real “nobody,” he is out in the wilderness rather than in the places of power and influence. John is out in the “boondocks.” Boondocks...that word that came into English after World War II when the troops came back from the Philippines in the Pacific. “Boondocks” is American attempt at the word *bandok* in Tagalog, the native language of the Philippines, which literally means “mountain.” However, when the Philippine native meant “mountain,” what the American service people saw was the rough and wild back country—“boondocks” became a synonym for the “the sticks,” or “the wilds.” And that’s where John was—in the “boondocks.”

What’s John doing in the wilderness? Let us continue:

Move 2:

3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as 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.*

*5 Every 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;*

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

John is out in the wilderness to do the will of God. Knowing the will of God is not always easy—sometime knowing what God wills is more difficult than doing God’s will. Some of you may recall that Lyndon Baines Johnson, as the president in the 1960s, said that the hardest thing about being president was not doing the right thing. What was often harder than **doing** the right thing was **knowing** what was the right thing...what was best for those concerned...what was honorable and good.

John was out in the wilderness to do God’s will. And when it comes to doing God’s will, here is one sure rule: God’ will will fit the pattern of God’s work in the past. It may be a surprising fit; it may be an unexpected fit, but it will be a fit. Here in this story about John, the fit is stated in terms of the prophet Isaiah. What the prophet Isaiah expected centuries beforehand was that the return of the exiles from the Babylonian captivity. Their return would be like “Easy Street”—mountains and hills made low...crooked made straight...a religious revival—“all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Was it “Easy Street?” No...but it seemed that way, given the excitement and anticipation of the return. Was there a religious revival? Yes, they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. But it was it as wonderful as these words of Isaiah? Not exactly, but the return happened. It was done. So, why do we still read Isaiah’s words? I mean, if already it was done...the way in the wilderness, the religious revival, and so forth, why do we still read Isaiah? Because...because the pattern of God’s work in the past enables us to see the pattern of God’s work in the presence. We learn Bible to know the language, to recognize the patterns, to be conscious of God’s mysterious work. And so this John—this John the Baptist—fits the ancient pattern of the return from exile. There is a voice in the wilderness preparing the clear way of the Lord. John fits the pattern of God work in the past.

So what does John say those who coming to him...those who want to leave Exile and come into the Promised Land? First, there is a surprise.

Move 3:

⁷ John 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?” ⁸ Bear 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. ⁹ Even now the ax 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.”

If one of the cardinal rules of public speaking is not to begin with an apology, another important rule is “Don’t insult your audience.” Let’ see here, John is preparing the way of the Lord and he calls his hearers “snakes”...vipers...belly-crawling reptiles! What kind of talk is this? After all, he is speaking to God’s chosen people, the children of Abraham and Sarah. He is speaking to those who were born into the family of God. But John’s message is that the way is not matter of heredity, of birthright, of pedigree. Our birth does not guarantee our inheritance. That’s why one of the recurring Biblical patterns is “rebirth”...born again...new birth. Sometimes we Presbyterians do not want to face “born again” language but rebirth language and new birth language are a recurring Biblical pattern. Our pedigree...whether we are related to Abraham or royalty or Robert E. Lee does not guarantee our return from Exile. John says: Don’t depend on your birthright as children of Abraham. Perhaps John would say today: Don’t assume your privilege as Americans. Don’t think your education guarantees your wisdom. Don’t take for granted your superiority. Transformation...conversion...rebirth—all are part of the preparation of the way of the Lord.

So what is the way that John is preparing?

Move 4:

¹⁰ *And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"* ¹¹ *In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."* ¹² *Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"* ¹³ *He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."* ¹⁴ *Soldiers 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."*

Ethics matter...generosity matters. Generosity matters for those who have two coats, those who have food, those who have positions of responsibility and power. Generosity matters. Isn't that the power of the familiar morality tale of Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*? There is almost universal recognition of the word "Scrooge" as a description of a selfish, self-centered, ungenerous person (even more recognized than the word "Grinch").

The word "Scrooge" entered our language in the mid-1840's. As those at the Men's Breakfast were reminded yesterday, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* had a profound effect on American culture, particularly in the observance of the Christmas season. As Jack Neely documented in his history of Market Square, the celebration of Christmas was not a major event in the early America. It was another work day. In the Bible Belt of colonial America—Massachusetts—the celebration of Christmas was even outlawed. Remember how Scrooge did not want to let Bob Cratchit off for Christmas Day—that was a non-issue in Knoxville, Tennessee in the early 1800s. December 25 was not a holiday—December 25 was a work day. Indeed, when mentioned in early newspapers, December 25 was found in legal notices, the day set for settling annual bills. If the bills were not paid by December 25, then payments could not be posted, recorded, and balanced. December 25 was sort of equivalent to April 15 today—a due date for annual bills.

Our view of Christmas has been shaped by Ebenezer Scrooge—a man who chooses to honor Christmas every day of his life. And how does he honor it? Generosity...generosity...generosity. Charles Dickens story was a major factor in lifting up this season as time of charity, giving, kindness, and sharing. The man that Ebenezer Scrooge became after the visitation of spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future was a man after the way of John the Baptist.

There is no substitute for generosity, but it turns out that even it is not enough.

Move 5:

¹⁵ *As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,* ¹⁶ *John 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."* ¹⁷ *His 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."*

Generosity is vital, central, key...but not enough. Doing the right thing is "right," but it still can be lacking. Francois Mauriac had an eye for this. Mauriac, the French Nobel prize-winning author, has a novel entitled, *The Woman of the Pharisees*. It revolves around a certain rich woman named Brigitte who was concerned about the poor people of her village. She felt it was her duty to visit

them frequently...which she did. She felt she needed to share her faith—so she said a prayer with each visit about the humble, needy, poor, uneducated, unwise ways of those with whom she prayed. And left behind a little gift suitable to their needs—their needs as she defined them—along with instructions on how use the gift and how that a little more ambition and hard work could improve their lot. She never met anybody she did not try to improve. Of course, she merely depressed the villagers and angered them. They hated her for the gifts she brought, and they hated themselves for taking them. The “woman of the Pharisees”—she did the right thing and people hated her...and her self-satisfaction with herself was a shallow, shallow comfort.

In some ways it is like the playful epitaph that C. S. Lewis once wrote for a tombstone of one Martha Clay. The epitaph reads:

Erected by her sorrowing brothers
In memory of Martha Clay.
Here lies one who lived for others,
Now she has peace. And so have they!

Martha Clay...Madame Brigitte...generosity is not enough. John the Baptist, no slacker on ethics and generosity, declares the way of out exile has “one more thing”—waiting for the one who comes. Look, says John, for the one comes after me.

Generosity matters...Charles Dickens got that right—honoring Christmas in our hearts. But none of us graduates from the need of Advent...of looking to the one who comes. Advent matters—we keep looking for the one who comes...who baptizes us with Holy Spirit and fire. Our final move in this unfinished sermon is to wait...to wait for the one who is coming, so that we can practice a generosity of transformed hearts...hearts baptized with Holy Spirit and fire. Here is the final move of this sermon: Maranatha...come, Lord Jesus, come.