

DON'T BE AFRAID OF CHANGE

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."

-Rumi

Sunday, December 8, 2024

"Don't Be Afraid of Change" | Luke 3: 1-18 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Last week, we heard the curious account of Zechariah in Luke 1. In case you missed it or in case you forgot, he is the elderly father of John the Baptist. When confronted by an angel with a surprising message, Zechariah was told, "Don't be afraid."

That same message came to young, unmarried Mary, in Luke 1: Don't be afraid. And that same message came to the shepherds when Jesus was born, in Luke 2: Don't be afraid.

Are you sensing a theme here?

During this Advent season, which covers the four Sundays before Christmas, our theme is "Don't Be Afraid" which is appropriate pretty much any time, including our present day, with all the political chaos, the environmental concerns, and more.

While the Bible is filled with "don't be afraid" messages, our focus is on the first 3 chapters of Luke, which is all prologue to the life and ministry of Jesus. Three of Luke's 24 chapters are about setting the stage for Jesus, meaning that preparation is important. Three chapters out of 24—that's 12.5% of the chapters of Luke dedicated to prologue, in which Jesus barely says a word, for anyone who likes statistics.

And we're focusing on Luke in part because in January we're asking all of you to read the entire gospel of Luke. Stay tuned on that.

Today's reading comes from the start of Luke chapter 3, which some scholars believe to be the original beginning of the gospel, with its detailed historical date stamp. Many of the characters in Luke 1 and 2 do not appear elsewhere in the gospel.

So Luke 3 is kind of like a second beginning.

John the Baptist (artwork by Harold Copping) appears in all four gospels, and he is portrayed fairly consistently as an outsider, a prophet who lives on the fringes of society.

He has a message for the people, calling them to prepare for the coming of Jesus through repentance, which is best understood as a change of mind, of heart, or a change of direction. He calls for people to prepare for something new, to live in new ways.

Our reading is long, so I'm going to read it in sections.

For this first section, it's worth remembering that the roads of 2000 years ago were not paved and painted like our today. They were muddy and sandy and bumpy. And it's worth highlighting that this section of the reading concludes with an inclusive affirmation that salvation is for everyone. Listen for the first six verses of chapter 3.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, 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. 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.’”



This is good news: God will smooth things out, making the journey possible, so that everyone can find the pathway to God.

Baptism is how we embark on this journey.

In the next section of the reading we see that John seems to have had a pretty good understanding of human nature, despite living in the wilderness. He sensed that at least some of the people, apparently the “religious” people, didn’t feel that THEY had to change but only that “other” people did.

Because of this concern, John shifts from the inclusive affirmation of God’s salvation for everyone to a blunt warning for the self-righteous religious people. Listen for verses 7-9.

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and 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; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

When we’re faced with an important or challenging part of Scripture, I think it’s worth looking at different translations. The variety helps me hear God’s word in a fresh way. Sometimes

passages that are familiar or “religious” just kind of glide over our ears. So listen for how The Message version of the text puts Luke 3.7-8a.

“When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin. Luke 3:7-9 MSG

So, preparing for Jesus involves changing, not just superficially but deep down.

This is one reason why we take the season of Advent seriously—four weeks to get ready for Jesus to arrive. Four weeks to prepare and to change. Four weeks to ponder hope, peace, joy, and love.

Yes, the decorations and the trees and gifts and the lights and the Christmas cookies are all wonderful, but if they’re not helping us prepare and change, then we’re not paying attention.

In the next section of Luke 3 we find the people of a certain personality type who want to know what the concrete and specific next steps are to prepare the way and be faithfully baptized into a changed life.

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

As I ponder John’s words to the crowd, it leads me to think about what baptism and repentance and faithful Christian living mean for and for us today.

- What are we called to share? Maybe our coats, maybe our food, maybe something else?
- How are we being called to change?
- How are we changing, evolving, improving?
- How are we as a church changing, involving, improving?
- How is God inviting us to prepare the way, to get ready for Christmas?

The final section of the reading has John clarifying his role in relation to Jesus, while reminding people of the process of transformation, which involves separating the good and the bad. While it might be tempting to think of some people as the good wheat and some as the bad chaff, it seems more appropriate to recognize that we each have some wheat and some chaff,

and that God is in the process of changing us, which is good news.

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[a] ¹⁶John 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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with^[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His 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.” ¹⁸So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.

This message of change and of learning to be kind and generous is framed as good news.

In Jesus Christ, God came into the world calling for change. John’s message was about changing our individual lives and becoming more generous and fairer.

It would be nice if the story ended there, and the sermon ended here, but there is more.

Apparently, John the Baptist’s message of change was a threat to the political and religious power structure of the day.

As we read in the next two verses of Luke, John was arrested and thrown in prison by Herod—the corrupt ruler of that time.

But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison. (Luke 3:19-20)

Apparently, John rebuked Herod for the “evil things” he had done. Eventually John the Baptist, the messenger of change, was killed. And so was Jesus.

While we might not want to hear such things during the festive season leading up to Christmas, violence and injustice and death are part of the biblical story—and very much part of our world today, even though most of us here at Covenant are fairly sheltered from these realities.

Most of our friends in Guatemala are not sheltered from violence, injustice, and death like we are, so the least we can do is acknowledge the reality.

In the face of death, even unjust and unfair deaths, God has the audacity to say, “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid.

It’s important to note that the message is NOT “there is nothing which we should fear.” God knows and the angels do too that the world is a scary place. There is injustice, and cruelty, and

unspeakable sadness and outright evil. The call is to choose something other than fear and do the best we can to keep going.

So, we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” as well as “deliver us from evil.” We do our best to love our neighbors and continue the journey together.

Not being afraid is hard to do when we’re alone.

What helps us not to be afraid is the companion message that we are not alone. God is with us in the person of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit. Emmanuel means “God is with us.” One of the primary ways God is with us is in the presence of other people.

When I was a kid, I was afraid of the basement in our house. There was a carpeted section where we had games and an old TV, but the other section of the basement was dark and damp, with the loud and mysterious oiler burner, spider webs, and rusty pipes. On the stairs up the main floor there were two spooky carvings of heads.

I remember regularly running up those stairs, past the spooky head and slamming the door as quickly as possible. However, thinking back when someone else was with me, I was never afraid, and I would walk up the stairs like a normal person.

When I wasn’t alone, I wasn’t afraid.

One of the most important things we do as Christians is the simple act of coming together, of being together, of encouraging each other on the journey. So, I’m grateful for those who are here in the sanctuary, and I’m grateful for those who are connecting with us online, and I hope you know that you’re not alone.

Do not be afraid; God is with us, now and always.

To close the sermon today, I’d like us to sing together verse 4 of an Advent hymn which acknowledges that the world is dark and scary while encouraging us to stick together and focus on God’s love, which will be the conclusion of our story. Please remain seated as we sing.

“Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn!”

Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night.
Though dark the winter and cheerless,
the rising sun shall crown you with light;
be strong and loving and fearless.
Love be our song and love our prayer
and love our endless story;
may God fill every day we share
and bring us at last into glory.