

**12/17/06**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
**Brentwood 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church**  
**“Old Testament Prophets and Sandals”**  
**Mike Magee**  
**Nehemiah 7:1-2,4, 8:5-6, 8-12**  
**Luke 3:7-18**

**Introduction**

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent. The season when we say to each other that Jesus is coming. This is the 5<sup>th</sup> of a 6 Sunday series on building up the spirituality in a church. Our church.

As we said before, the Good News according to Luke is unique in a lot of ways. It is written by a physician, the physician of Apostle Paul. We know this both because of its medical vocabulary and because elsewhere Paul refers to Luke as his physician. And he uses in addition to a medical vocabulary, a theological vocabulary. So Luke is both a physician and a preacher. On a personal level, the next 12 months of the lectionary from Luke will be exciting for me.

We said recently the Good News according to Luke has the most parables. It is the only Gospel with the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Good News according to Luke is also unique because it has the most material of all the Gospels on John the Baptizer. We have here essentially a full accounting of John the Baptizer's three point sermon. He probably gave this sermon over and over again.

**Sequence 1**

**We read today from the NRSV, which is very similar to the NKJV. But I like how the Message Bible retells the story. Its retelling makes you think.**

*John explodes, “Brood of snakes! What do you think you are 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. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor*

*there – children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it is deadwood, it goes on the fire.” The Message*

John starts out with a rather shocking accusation, doesn't he? “You brood of vipers! You children of snakes!” He conjures up an image of a barn thick with snakes which has been set on fire. The snakes are slithering out of the barn toward the river. I suspect he is not using the word viper in the sense of what our culture would call an inherently evil person. Evil like the stepmother in Snow White, the one who says, “Mirror, mirror on the wall.” No, I suspect he is using the word viper in the sense of a creature whose head is down. Of a creature who is not reflective and is unconsciously influenced by the culture around it. A creature who has never heard it does not have to go through life victimized by both nature and nurture, victimized by genetics and by culture. A creature who has never heard there is a third influence. A third influence if it will but look and listen. I suspect he is speaking of a complex creature, not all good, and not all bad. A creature like you and me. I think he believes some people coming down to the Jordan River that hot day 2000 years ago are coming because they want to belong to a social club. They want to promote and advertise their business. They are saying, “What's the buzz, tell me what's happening.” They want to rise up the social ladder. But they only want a skin deep baptism.

I suspect that John wants instead a real change, not a superficial skin deep change. Not a sheep dip that changes nothing on the inside. Yes for John, the Baptism is symbolic, but he wants it to be symbolic not of membership as if Baptism by itself is an initiation rite. I suspect for John, Baptism is symbolic of membership in a community of *changed* people.

**There is a story of a man who has broken relationships. His relationship with his children is broken. His relationship with his wife is broken. And even more devastatingly, because he feels he has been given a bad rap, a bad life, his relationship with God is broken. Then he is diagnosed with pancreas cancer. He is told he has 6 months to live. His doctor says there is no cure. But he will live 6 months. Knowing his time with his family is short, he sets to work on his broken relationships. He focuses with a focus imposed by the knowledge of his imminent mortality. At the end of 6 mos, he tells his physician he is sorry he did not get the cure. But he is healed. His relationships with his family and with God are healed, and he is ready. It takes the pressure of a medical illness for him to focus on his brokenness. In a way, his illness has given him a gift. His illness gives him the gift of finally focusing on what is truly important. Wouldn't the world be a better place if we all focus like every day is our last?**

As the hymn writer says, "Now you need not fear the grave, Jesus Christ was born to save. Calls you one and calls you all, to gain the everlasting hall. He has opened heaven's door, and we are blessed forever more. Christ was born to save."

John does not tell us to change for the sake of change. He also does not want a skin deep change. John talks about a change on the inside. A reprioritization. Every thing in its proper place. Everything finally in focus. A change of heart that causes us to change how we behave.

### **Sequence 2**

*"If you have two coats, give one away. Do the same with your food." The Message.*

In Jesus' day, I do not think there were many people who had extra food to spare. I do not think there were many people with closets overstuffed with clothes that no longer fit. I think the second point of John's sermon, to share food and clothing, was addressed to a minority in his day and place. Society in the USA 2000 years later is a different place, isn't it?

**A few years ago I visited a church in another town. The leader of the Sunday School class, at a church that will remain nameless, was talking about what each of us do when our car passes a homeless person with a sign up. The leader of the class said when I roll my window down and give them money, this just facilitates and enables the homeless.**

**Two nights ago, this past Friday, I was sitting in my car on the entrance ramp again. The entrance ramp from Church Street onto I-65. On my left, under the bridge, was a homeless person's entire life's possessions. They weren't much, but there were several pair of socks, a pair of pants, and a sweatshirt. They were wet and were spread out to dry. A few yards down on the left was their owner. He held a cardboard sign that said simply, "God bless." I fumbled for a dollar bill in my cigarette tray where I keep my change. The car in front of me was the first one in line to hand him money. Proudly thinking I had done my good deed for the homeless that day, so did I. And as expected he said, "God bless you." And I returned the blessing. Then I looked back over my shoulder to see what the man in the car behind me was doing. He had rolled his window down but was not handing him any money. I could not hear, but guessed he was saying something un-Christ-like, like "Go get a job," or something like that. But then it happened.**

**I am not sure I have ever seen this happen before. The man in the car behind me took his coat off and handed it through the window to the homeless man. I could not believe my eyes. I thought, I wonder if he had read today's lectionary. A sermon written out of time and out of place. A sermon written to us today.**

This second point of John's sermon seems *less* addressed to *2000 year ago* Mediterranean peasants and less to *current day* Central and South America peasants, and more to people living in the USA today, doesn't it? John's sermon reaches across 2000 years, across the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and speaks directly to us today, doesn't it? It reaches across two oceans and 2000 years and grabs us by the hearts. What does John, and what does Jesus want me to do? All I had to do is look over my shoulder to find out.

### **Sequence 3**

*"I'm baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He is going to clean house – make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned." The Message*

The next point in John's sermon is that he proclaims a housecleaning. Things are about to change drastically. But the chaff that will burn is not bad people like the Disney cartoon character. I suspect John was talking about the bad habits that we all have, like ignoring the poor, the oppressed, and the sick. But the emphasis is not on burning. It is on God, through Jesus, saving us from sin. And then John puts himself into perspective in relationship to his cousin Jesus.

In Jesus' day, not even students of a master teacher did such a subservient thing as change the sandals of their teacher. This was relegated to the slaves of the wealthy. So being unworthy to even untie another's sandals means less worthy than even a slave.

John the Baptizer was, shall we say, different. He wore a nasty camel hair tunic. He ate bugs for heaven's sake! He lived in the desert. He was, frankly, an eccentric. But he was also what we call ascetic. He denied bodily comfort. He denied bodily pleasure. And he was the first and the last prophet. He was the first Hebrew prophet in over 400 years. And theologically, he was the last Hebrew prophet, the last prophet before the Good News. That is not to say he preached a bad news Bible. He was just different than you and me. And he was also different than Jesus. How was he different than Jesus?

Remember that scripture tells us Jesus loved life. His first miracle was to change water to wine! He took boating trips with his friend Peter. Admittedly not all these trips were fun, but surely some of his boat trips were recreational! There are numerous stories of him breaking bread and drinking wine with his disciples, and he even had a picnic or two with 5000 of his closest friends! We can confidently say that unlike his cousin John, that Jesus loved life.

Scripture also tells us Jesus' theology diverges somewhat from some of the Old Testament prophets, and from John the Baptizer, who was, frankly, the last of the OT prophets even though his story appears in the NT. The OT prophets had a lot to say about how to get right with God. About performing the right ethical deeds and the right rituals, and about having the right faith and saying the right creeds. A lot to say about righteousness. That is, about works righteousness and about faith righteousness. Many of the OT prophets proclaimed this theology, and so did John the Baptizer. But John admits he is unworthy to untie Jesus' sandals. He admits he is the proclaimer of Jesus, not the proclaimer of Jesus' Good News. The word Gospel means Good News. We have to wait for Jesus for the Good News. We do not get the Good News until we get to hear Jesus.

The Good News is Jesus' reinterpretation of the law and prophets. He does not change them. He reinterprets them.

**I know an assistant scoutmaster who gave an experiential sermon on a campout. He had previously set up a target for bow and arrow 30 yards away, the target almost hidden between the trees. He took out his bow, and removed an arrow from the quiver on his back, and one after the other pulled back on the bowstring and sent an arrow straight and true into the center of the target. It was amazing to behold. But on about the 10<sup>th</sup> draw on his bowstring, the arrow went wide into the forest behind the target. His sermon for the day is that we do not always hit the mark, no matter how good we are, and no matter how hard we try.**

A few years after John the Baptizer and after Jesus, Apostle Paul interprets what Jesus says. His message is that none of us, none of us, can always hit the mark. All of us fall short of the glory of God. We try hard, but we can't do it. Only Jesus can always hit the mark. We are too weak. This is why our salvation from sin cannot be dependent on either our deeds or our creeds. Instead, it is dependent on the mercy, love, and forgiveness of God. That is, it is dependent on God's grace. It is dependent on the revelation we have in the birth, life, ministry, suffering death, and God's resurrection from nothingness of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the writer of Silent Night says, "The dawn of redeeming grace."

### **Conclusion**

The focus of imminent mortality. What one does with two coats. An arrow which does not hit the mark. How can we integrate John the Baptizer's sermon 2 oceans away and 2000 years later?

Let's try this. A fiery baptism by the Holy Spirit is not a sheep dip. It is not an initiation. A fiery baptism by the Holy Spirit changes you forever. It grabs your heart and never lets go. A baptism by the Holy Spirit changes you from the inside out.

Can you see him? John the Baptizer is standing in the Jordan, just over there, waiting for you. And if you look over your shoulder, you just might see Jesus give someone his coat.

Glory be to God. Hallelujah. And Amen.