

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
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Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

The Path of Peace

Today, to mark our Advent waiting we lit the second candle of our Advent wreath. We have lit the candle of Peace.

And the lectionary, the prescribed texts for the season have John the Baptist entering the scene. Not exactly a name, a figure, an image that comes to mind when I think of peace, but maybe there is something here.

Before we go any further, let’s look at our bulletin cover. Listen to the description given on the Arlington Street (Unitarian Universalist) Church website of this particular Tiffany window:

John the Baptist is portrayed as a heroic figure. Gazing upwards and into the distance, he leans against a rocky shoreline and supports himself with a staff topped by a crucifix form. In his left hand, he holds a shell, emblematic of Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his ministry. The reeds at the lower right, as well as the distant body of water and mountainscape, evoke the Sea of Galilee. An atmospheric sky behind the mountain is enlivened through glass plates patterned with accents of pink, orange, and yellow. In addition to the inclusion of an acanthus leaf at the bottom of each side of the floral border, at the border’s pinnacle, there is an oval-shaped opalescent hand-faceted glass jewel insert, reminiscent of an opal, a motif featured in several windows in the sanctuary’s series.

How nice. How lovely. But, I ask you, does this all go with how you think of John the Baptist? It doesn’t so much for me.

When I think of John the Baptist, I don't think so much of "accents of pink, orange, and yellow". I think of brown, the color of camel's hair, and I think of locusts, which he apparently ate, and I imagine not these flowing robes this John is wearing but something with burrs stuck all over it. And I imagine not reeds, and lakeside mountains but desert, dry desert wilderness for goodness sake. Though of course there was some water there, how else did all those baptisms happen?

But here's the part that really doesn't work for me, though don't get me wrong, the window is gorgeous: It's the looking off into the distance, the look of holy wonder that appears on John's face as he clutches his cross-shaped staff and shell for baptism. Because here's the thing I think we know about John: He was not some mystic, gazing off into the distance, Thinking of God on high. No, he looked at *people*...he looked right at *you*...and there was something about his gaze that burned right through you, that got right to the part of you might rather cover up or hide. That was his strength and his power...the way God made him.

So, I would have liked John to have been looking out, straight at us. But this would be uncomfortable. This would be harder to look at. Which kind of explains this idealized holy man in the lushness of nature approach that apparently appealed more to Louis Comfort Tiffany, he of the famous stained glass studio.

I'll give him this. It's a beautiful thing to prepare the way of the Lord. To make people's hearts ready, truly ready to be touched by God in human form in this one we know is coming, this one who shall be named Jesus, God with us, Emmanuel. It is a beautiful thing for someone, anyone, to bring us closer to God.

John the Baptist came, as our scripture tells us, in a particular time. A time of the emperor Tiberius, and Pontius Pilate, and Herod, and his brother Phillip, and Lysinias, and Annas and Caiaphus. All these political and religious figures so clearly named. Luke mentions them so we'll be grounded in the time in which John appeared. So we'll be reminded how the Romans encouraged emperor worship and even introduced images of the emperors into the holy city of Jerusalem. So we'll be reminded how Herod's taxes buried the people, and how Roman rule seemed to bring about so much hardship and compromise. Luke mentions them, all those people, so we'll recognize that John the Baptist came at a time *when the people of Israel were ripe for change*.

I had to read on in Luke to remember how the change will come. There's the lovely poetic stuff from Isaiah about mountains being laid low, and crooked paths made straight, but really the change that was a-comin' involved people, people, and their hearts.

If you keep reading in Luke, the very same chapter three, John is quoted speaking a word of repentance, telling them not to hide behind their religion being overly sure they are good with God.

Then he starts addressing people not en masse, not in a sermon on the mount type setting, wisdom for all folks, but *one by one*. One by one he gets to the matter of how they are functioning, how they are behaving, how they are holding their power.

Luke tells us that the people, hearing John preach began to ask What then shall we do? And then it gets personalized: (and listen to how focused, how ethical are John's responses) *And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?" And he answered them, "he who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; And he who has food, let him do likewise." Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them "Collect no more than is appointed you" (in other words, don't rip people off, don't be corrupt) Soldiers also asked him "And what shall we do?" And he said to them "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:10-14)*

This part helps me get off the camel's hair and locusts, the rougher side of John, to the part that is wanting to bring people closer to God, to tear down the barriers that exist between God and people, between people and people. Notice how John roots it in ethical living -- sharing what we have, using our power well, holding our station without abusing the people we encounter daily. Each person, tax collector or soldier, is asked to consider the office they have, and how to use their power within that office.

In bible study, someone said, "You know, we often think we don't have that much power, but we do. We have the power within our families, and in our neighborhoods and in all the groups which we participate in. We have the power to consider our own words and actions, and whether or not we are living an authentic, faithful life." Someone also quoted someone else who said: When asked how to treat others, remember there are no "others".

On Facebook this week I saw a meme that said: "The mark of a great church is not how many people come, but how many people live differently for having been there." That is John, so John the Baptist. And John today could help us think on our own baptisms and how we are living. See, the mark that was placed on us in baptism is water, water in the sign of the cross. It is meant to change us, change us *from the inside out*, as Eugene Peterson translates it. It is meant to make us disciples, people who follow Jesus. It is meant therefore to imbue a status, a status that can be seen – in changed values, in changed attitudes, in changed responses to the people around us.

I recently heard a clergy person share a disturbing story. He was working with a church member at the church's food pantry site. A family came in who was dark complected, and who had recently come from India. They shared their name, which had many component parts, including the part of India, they were from, right there in their name. When the couple had been served and walked away from the man, a pillar of the church, said: "I am so sick of this political correctness about names from all these immigrants."

There in the bread line, angry words from a church man who gave out food, but who had not let his religion really enter in.

This is why I am not so enamored of John gazing off into the distance. It is here and now, in the very real stuff of our lives, where God wants to purchase, where God wants in. Will, we let God's spirit of love and mercy, compassion and forgiveness enter in, so that it can be fully seen in us? We can be so self-righteous and judgmental towards our brothers and sisters. In the midst of our times, our particular times it is so tempting to join right into the mockery and derision of those who don't think like us, see the world like us or perhaps those whose life experience has been so very different from ours.

John, not the John who looks off into the glowing scenery, but the John who looks us straight in the eye asks will we get ready by preparing our hearts, translated not in sweet sentiment or flowery language but in hearts set toward *righteous behavior*? This morning I awoke to a program on NPR about Me Too. What is so difficult this wise woman said, is to talk about inequality we have to look straight at our most intimate relationships and how power is being used there, and how respect and dignity are needed right there. We have to look at dynamics that have been in place, ones we participate in.

We had a big event this week, a national day of mourning. There were many touching parts of the day. The reminders in tributes of President Bush's integrity and graciousness and commitment to his country. The welcome letter he wrote to Bill Clinton when it was his time to exit. I heard many people remarking on Bob Dole being helped to his feet to salute. Did the day of mourning help us get in touch with our "better angels"? Did it deepen a longing for a kinder, gentler nation? This week, we saw some love *in Washington*. What difference might it make? Can we be led from all this fractiousness to the ways of peace?

We can hope and we can pray. And we can work, each of us, *to be peace ourselves*.

May we be strengthened to that end, and may we come to Jesus table today ready to be fortified for that endeavor.

Amen.