

Jan. 10, 2021 -- (Baptism of Our Lord, Jesus' Baptism)

Sermon Text – Luke 3:1-22

- 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? Bear fruits worthy of repentance..." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In 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." -

Okay. Let's get right to it. John the Baptist "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins... [and he] said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, '...Bear fruits worthy of repentance...' And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?'" In between, he uses some interesting and colorful remarks to clarify his message to the crowds who came out to be baptized, calling them a "bunch of snakes" and warning them not to rely on their ancestry as a guarantee of God's good favor. I guess that's what you call "wilderness language." It's not so nice for polite company; but, out in the wilderness, it seems that anything goes, in order to speak the word of truth clearly. John the Baptist functions in this story as a prophet. Some would call him the last of the Old Testament prophetic traditions. Others suggest that he is the first of a new breed of prophets beginning with the New Testament. Whichever it may be, Biblical scholar, Walter Bruggeman, says this about our prophetic work today. "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair." If we are to do that, then John the Baptist can serve well as our example of how to get it done.

First, notice where this happens. It doesn't take place in the big city center of power, not in the Temple of Jerusalem, and not in the palace of Herod. It takes place out in the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan river. That's where God is. That's where truth is spoken. That's where the way is being prepared for "all flesh [to] see the salvation of God." And it doesn't involve the powerful people of the world. It doesn't happen with the Roman Emperor or the governor of the territory. It doesn't happen with the trio of Jewish political leaders, Herod and Phillip and Lysanias. And it doesn't happen with the religious leaders of the Temple, Annas and Caiaphas. It happens with the only son of an elderly couple, who were much surprised by his birth,

John, the son of Zechariah (and Elizabeth), who is now grown to a man of thirty years of age. And it doesn't occur because of sophisticated language. It doesn't occur because of deep philosophical argument. It doesn't occur because of soaring oratory. It occurs because of plain spoken and simple words that call people to wash their lives clean and change the direction of their futures through a baptism of repentance.

The response is simple and straight forward. When the people in the crowd ask, "What then should we do?" John responds by telling them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors, known for their lying and cheating, he says, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." And to the soldiers, who used their power and privilege to take advantage of others, he says, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." It's that simple. Early in my career, author Robert Fulghum came out with a book that said much the same thing. It was called "All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten." In it, he argued that even little children can understand the principles of living in a just society. Think about what you learned in kindergarten. "Share your toys, and whatever else you have, with those who don't have any or enough." "Play fair. Follow the rules. Don't try to cheat." And "take care. Look out for one another. Make sure that everyone is treated with respect."

This past Wednesday, many of us were traumatized when our nation's capital was attacked by an unruly mob of people trying to disrupt the work of the Senate and the House of Representatives as they met to fulfill their duties. I have hesitated to say much about it publicly, preferring instead to take the time needed to sort through my feelings and formulate a reasonable response. My colleague, Angela Denker, whom I consider a much more qualified student of such things, responded almost immediately. She said she was going to choose the word "BE" as her guiding word for the new year. She said to often we value ourselves and others by what we do. She thought she saw a lot of people doing that on Wednesday – refusing to accept the results of the election, breaking through the lines of security, endangering peoples' lives, and planting their flags in the halls of the legislature. It didn't look like a pretty picture. Instead, she said, she would like to try to "BE" by "focus[ing] on the following questions: Who am I? What are my values? How do I love my neighbor as myself? How do I follow...Jesus?" In my mind, her choice of the word "BE" suggests the answers. "BE kind. BE loving. BE fair. BE just. BE caring. BE careful. BE the one to forgive. BE the one who embodies Christ in our world today. BE..." It won't be easy, but it will be worthwhile.

Luke ends this story with only the briefest mention of Jesus' baptism. "Now when all the people had been baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." And then a voice speaks to Jesus from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It is a confirmation of Jesus' identity leading into Luke's listing of his genealogy. This is who Jesus is. It is a clear guide to who he is to BE. It uses Old Testament words and concepts to paint a distinctive picture. Drawing from the royal psalms, the words let us know that it is Jesus, not any of those powerful people listed at the beginning of the passage, who is God's beloved Son, and from the "Suffering Servant" imagery in the prophet Isaiah comes the addition of "with you I am well pleased." So Jesus is to BE both royal representative of God's rule and servant who suffers for the good of God's people. It is a huge task, but it is good for us to begin with an understanding that is clear and simple.

In our own baptisms, parents are entrusted with responsibilities for their child's education in the faith, and to "nurture them in faith and prayer, so that your [child] may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace." It is a big task, but it is who we are. It is who we are called to BE, children of God, God's representatives on earth, who serve God's people by taking care of and working for the things that make for good in our world. It's enough to stop us up short. When we see the powerful people of our day living out Bruggeman's prophetic criticism of our society, basing their decisions and their actions on illusion, denial and despair, then we are called to BE something else in opposition, people who live their lives in truth, people who grieve over their losses and the fact that reality is less than they might wish it to be, and people who find hope in the one who came to be God's presence and serve God's people with a life of love and sacrifice. It won't Be easy, but in these days of national turmoil, we can BE the people God has called us to BE. It probably won't happen in the halls of power in Washington, D.C., but in the wilderness area of West Central Minnesota. And it probably won't take place because of the powerful leaders of our federal government, but because of the unknown individuals called in baptism to be followers of Christ. And it probably won't be accomplished with fancy words and high-falutin' concepts, but with the simple principles of how to live out our Christian callings. We learned those things back in kindergarten. Let's put them to uses now. Let's BE them today.

Amen.