
Prepare Ye The Way
Martin Grove United Church
December 6, 2015
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 3:1-18

Sometimes I feel like the Christian church is fighting itself. Last week was the first week in Advent, so of course we spoke about waiting for the birth of Jesus. And this week, the readings are all about John the baptizer and baptism. Why are we talking about baptism when Jesus hasn't even been born yet?

Good Question. I just hope there is a good answer too!

The lectionary texts during Advent are a bit different anyway. During most of the year, the lectionary includes 4 readings every Sunday. One Old Testament reading that is not from the Psalms, one Psalm, one New Testament reading not from a gospel, and one gospel. But this week, there is no Psalm. Instead, the authors of the lectionary have decided that we need two doses of Luke. And just to confuse things a bit more, since our festival of anthems and lessons is next week and I won't be preaching then, I've combined this week's and next week's readings about John the baptizer. Because even if we struggle to understand why we are talking about baptism before Jesus is born, the authors of the lectionary think it's important - and perhaps we will too.

But I suppose I should start by asking what your image of baptism is. We all come from somewhat different traditions. I think I have a pretty good idea of what baptisms are normally like here at Martin Grove. For example, from the size of our font I can guess that we don't usually practice full-body immersion here.

My own personal favourite image of baptism is an image from Central Park in Manhattan, New York. More specifically, from the Bethesda Fountain located in the park. The fountain is a large structure that a dozen people could easily come together in to splash water on each other and to share the spirit in fun and in frenzy. At least that's how it appeared in the opening scene of the musical *Godspell*.

How many of us know the musical *Godspell* – and remember the baptism scene?

John calls people to come, to prepare ye the way of the lord, and a small but happy band of people come to the park, jump into the water fountain, and play with the water. They dump water on each other's heads, they splash in the water, they enjoy the water, they feel the water. All to a driving rock beat. It's a wonderful image for me of engaging fully with a sacrament.

The readings this week are about baptism, but they are also about John the Baptizer himself. And they present John not only as one who baptizes, but also as one who preaches, who reproaches, who upsets people, who is not afraid to use strong language, who does not just yield to authorities. He seems to follow my own model of ministry - he comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

The description of John the Baptizer is very interesting. On the one hand, he is clearly a person who is faithful and dedicated to what he believes. He is not afraid to share his thoughts with others. He is not afraid of challenging the authorities. On the other hand, he is probably someone who would repulse us. Someone who we would be trying to get away from as fast as we could if we met him on the streets ourselves.

But in any case, the story from our reading today is stunning by today's standards. People come to John to be baptized, and he not only refuses and turns them away - he criticizes them for even coming in the first place. Can you imagine what it would be like if we baptized like that here at Martin Grove? Do we turn people away and call them a "brood of vipers"? Or do we welcome them and just hope that they actually come back from time to time? I suspect that John's baptism was a bit different than our own.

Baptizing is John's "claim to fame", and yet, in our readings, John doesn't seem to think of the act of baptism as what is most important - what is most important is action and transformation. And interestingly, the transformation John speaks of is not just a moral transformation, or a theoretical rethinking of priorities. John's transformation hits people where they are. He names it: John told tax collectors, "Collect no more than is appointed you".

John's message is not a message about going to church regularly, or taking communion more often. It's not a message about being saved in the future. It's a

message about transforming one's life! It's no wonder John lost his head over all this.

Jim Rice ties it together like this: “Repentance is not just saying you're sorry, nor is it merely a change in your head or even your heart. Gospel repentance involves a change in your behavior, in the way you live your life. Most people likely see John's call to a transformed life as an indictment, and his mandate for treating the poor justly as, at best, an unpleasant chore. But John's call to repentance should be seen for what it is: an invitation to salvation, the fruit of relationship with the Holy One coming into our midst. When we respond to this invitation in a joyful spirit, we may help to contribute not only to a transformed world but to our own liberation.”

John had particular words for people in particular vocations. But personal and social transformation can happen even on the way to and from work. We are probably all aware that one day, a 42 year old seamstress who was commuting home on a bus started - or perhaps I should say brought to life - a social revolution. And what was her action on that particular day? She did absolutely nothing. Really. She did nothing at all, and started a revolution. On that particular December the first, social convention - and the law - required her to do something. And she did nothing. And she did nothing so well that within days people started a boycott of that bus service that reduced the ridership by over 70% for 381 days.

Not only that, but the group that spearheaded the boycott – the Montgomery Improvement Association – found new life and new leadership in a new local Baptist minister, an unknown person by the name of Martin Luther King Jr. The woman was Rosa Parks. And what she was required by law to do was to move to the back of the bus, because the bus driver had - legally - asked her to vacate her seat for a person with white skin.

And 381 days later, on December 21, 1956, the Montgomery's public transportation system was legally racially integrated. What do we make of Rosa Parks and that whole story? Was Rosa Parks just too lazy to move? Was the boycott an example of civil disobedience? Or is that whole story a story about making the roads straight. Is the story a story about preparing the way of the lord. Is the story about

liberation and salvation? Is the story about our own liberation and our own salvation? Is the story a story of a modern day John the baptizer?

And why is John so keen on this transformation business anyway? His call is to “make straight the roads” to welcome the coming messiah. I remember when I first heard this story, I thought it sounded - frankly - a bit unfair. I mean, what's the point of us poor mortals fixing everything up for the messiah? To be blunt - can't this messiah fix anything themselves? I used to think, what is the point of waiting for the birth of Jesus if we are expected to get this planet in shape for him?

But perhaps transformation is more important than we think. And if John the baptizer were here today, and John asked you your own profession or occupation - what suggestion do you think John would have for you - and for me? Would we be brave enough to listen to the answer? And might that answer be the coming of Christ for us this Advent?

Here - today - in Rexdale. What roads need to be made straight? What do we need to fix in our own lives, or in this church, or in the wider community to prepare for Christ in our midst? What roads need to be made straight to help us find our own liberation and salvation?

In the words of Richard Rohr, “How odd it is that God's salvation is so seldom recognized. How strange that what God is offering is so rarely experienced. We have presented salvation so poorly that much of the world does not even take it seriously. Oh yes, we want help, we want solace, we want magic, but I am not sure that we recognize or even want the scary freedom that God calls salvation.”

We are not called to make the roads straight because Jesus demands it. We are called to make the roads straight because that is how we achieve our own salvation. As Advent continues, let's keep our eyes, minds, and hearts wide open - this is a time of great opportunity.

Prepare Ye the Way!

Amen.