

## “The Wells of Salvation”

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Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 3:7-18

What would it be like to hear a preacher like John the Baptist? He would probably be the kind of person to live in a shack in the woods, and refuse to shave or wear decent clothing. And he would yell at us, calling us a brood of vipers, a swarm of poisonous snakes. He'd say things like, “Who told you to come here? Just because your grandparents used to be ushers and bring jello to the potlucks, don't think God approves of YOU. Baptism means nothing unless you change your lives and do what's right. Don't just shed tears and feel sorry for the state of the world! Do something to show that you understand the ways of God! And if you don't, Jesus is coming to destroy you, to burn you up, just like those fierce wild fires out west. Fffoop!”

Would you hire someone like that to lead your worship service? How many of you would keep coming if John the Baptist were to stand in this pulpit?

John the Baptist was a very different kind of character from Jesus. But Luke claimed he was preparing the way for Jesus with this baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. And according to all the gospels, the people flocked to hear him, great crowds traveling all the way into the wilderness from Jerusalem.

These people were eager for a change. And they didn't mind the message of judgment. In fact they welcomed it. The Jewish people at that time were living under Roman rule, and some of their religious leaders were cynical, corrupt, and collaborating with Rome. That's why John was out in the wilderness. He didn't want to be affiliated with any of the institutions of his day. And his message of judgment was good news to those who felt oppressed, because judgment falls on the oppressors. The people who ended up rejecting Jesus and killing him were not the poor and the sick and the outcasts. It was the people in power, the religious leaders and the Roman officials. And when rulers are selfish, dishonest and corrupt, judgment is truly a message of great joy.

Likewise, judgment is good news for anyone who has been misunderstood or mistreated. It's good news to children who are abused by their parents, or wives who are abused by their husbands. It's good news for LGBT people who have been rejected by family members, or mistreated, attacked, or even killed just for being themselves. It is good news for the children of the world who go hungry and have no schools or hospitals, while their leaders collect billions of dollars and keep it for themselves. Where I live in New York, two out of three of the most powerful law makers in the state have just been convicted of felonies and removed from office, for bribery and corruption. When judgment is on the side of justice, and calls out corruption and greed, people are glad to hear it.

But it's not enough just to judge others. Laura read this morning, that the people welcomed John's message of judgment and asked him, “What can we do? How can we help?” They were tired of the way things were and wanted to be part of this change, part of God's reign

breaking in to life on earth. And John's answer was simple. If you have two coats, share one of them. And the same with your food. If you're a tax collector, be honest in your work. If you're a soldier, don't use your position for personal gain, bullying people or extorting money from them. Be satisfied with what you earn honestly.

Things like this are not difficult for anyone to do. John did not demand people change their jobs or become something that wasn't true to who they were. If you are like a tax collector or soldier who works in a complicated or compromising kind of job, you don't necessarily have to quit. But you do need to do it right, and don't cheat or exploit others. It's simple: be yourself, be fair, respect other people and share with those in need, and you have prepared the way of the Lord.

What would it be like if our presidential candidates acted that way? What would it be like if our elected leaders, and all our police officers acted that way? How would it change the atmosphere of impatience, distrust and fear in this country if everyone who attended church today, would leave looking for opportunities to be honest, and kind and just? It would be a different world. We might think the Kingdom of God was at hand.

Today we get to baptize Benjamin Seung Jong Lee. It's always an honor to baptize someone who chooses as an adult to follow Jesus. And Sibomwenifumbo will also confirm her baptismal vows. Sibomwenifumbo was baptized as a baby in Malawi, but now she is announcing that she chooses for herself to follow Jesus. Also KJ Ahn and John (Jiho) Song will re-affirm their decisions to follow Jesus, as they join our church as members. And I'm not going to yell at anyone or call you a brood of vipers. Instead I will ask them, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?"

That's the beginning. That's what John the Baptist called the people into the wilderness to do. It's the first step of preparation, to renounce evil and its power in the world. We acknowledge where we have fallen short, where we have acted selfishly, where we have hurt people or neglected to care for the needs of others. We confess where we have cut ourselves off from God and not lived up to everything God created us to be.

But baptism is not just about repentance, or turning away from sin. So I also ask them, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?" In baptism we receive good news of forgiveness and life. We turn to Jesus and call him our Lord, our highest authority. We turn to Jesus as our savior, the one who lifts us up and gives us a new start. And we welcome the Holy Spirit into our hearts, trusting God's offer of grace and love. We are called God's beloved children, and given the power to live as God's children. And so we also ask, "Will you be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying his Word and showing his love?"

Baptism is just one point along the journey of faith. We are also to be disciples, life-long students of Jesus, listening to his words, and putting them into practice in the world. And when we join a church as a member, we choose to be on this journey of faith together, with this particular group of people.

Apparently Donald Trump has been calling himself Presbyterian for years. But after his recent comments about keeping Muslims from entering the country, Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York City called for the denomination to expel him. They said those comments were un-Christian and inconsistent with the teachings and example of Jesus. They didn't even mention that Mr. Trump also says he has never asked God for forgiveness. I don't think you can be a Presbyterian without confession and forgiveness. We do it every week. Still, the Stated Clerk of our denomination said it would be impossible to remove him, because Trump is not actually a member of any particular Presbyterian Church. He was baptized and confirmed in a Presbyterian Church in Queens, a long time ago. And he says he attends church on Christmas and Easter. But he's not an active member of any particular congregation.

Now you can be a member of a Presbyterian church and not be a Presbyterian, as long as you are Christian. But you can't call yourself a Presbyterian unless you are an active member of some kind of Christian church. People can't be disciples of Jesus alone. We need other people to help us hear and understand God's word, so that it shapes the way we think, what we value, and what we love. And we need to be accountable to others as we seek to act faithfully in the world; to be generous and call for generosity in others; to be honest and expect honesty from others; to refrain from bullying and exploitation, but work with kindness and integrity for the good of everyone. If we're not engaging with other Christians to do these things, we can't call ourselves Presbyterian, or even Christian. As John the Baptist said, it's not enough to have ancestors who were Christian. You have to choose it for yourself, and live it with a community of faith.

That's why I'm so happy that these four people are joining the church today. You know I'm about to retire in January, and today immediately after worship, you who are members of this congregation will vote to receive my resignation. And as I have said many times in the last few weeks, the church is not me. You are the church. And the fact that you have these four people joining you today, even though they know I'm about to leave, is a sign of faith and hope for you. There will be changes here, but you are moving forward and you will live. Thanks be to God!

Karen read this morning from the book of Isaiah: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation..." It is with joy that we fill this baptismal font and draw water to baptize and reaffirm our faith. This is the water of God's cleansing and renewing and gracious presence. It is a bottomless spring of living water, bringing life and hope to the thirsty ground of our lives. And we can shout with joy and sing praise to God, for we know that great in our midst is the Holy One. God is our strength, our might and our salvation. Amen.