

Advent 3C, December 12, 2021

Luke 3:7-18

Epiphany, Winnipeg

Repentance, Scene 1: John the Baptist, a shirttail relative of Jesus, is off in the dry lands around the Jordan River preaching and baptizing. Crowds come to listen to him and be baptized by him. They won't be baptized like Waylon was here last week or like Ivy will be three weeks from now, and they're not becoming part of the church – there was no church yet - but they come to be washed in the water and have their sins washed away in some symbolic way, to be made fresh and new again.

It's like they're in a dusty desert and there's greed being blown around in the air and it just sticks, you know, and with every breath you breathe in some injustice and some hurt, and there's dust that's called violence or fear or hate or spite, and it just sticks and clings. You know what it's like to walk outside on a windy dry summer day and the dust blows around and you come home kind of feeling like you're covered in it. You know what it's like to walk around in life for a day or two, and sometimes it just feels like the anxiety is sticking to you, or the resentment has settled down and it's in your hair and on your shoulders, or the fear or worry won't go away. Like it's blown in and covered you. And we come with all these people to be baptized by John in the river, and it's almost like the greed or the violence or the fear or whatever sin we might know is washed away with all the dust and sand, and we come out clean and ready to move on again.

Coming out fresh and ready to move on again.

John the Baptizer comes and preaches all about repentance. And repentance doesn't really just mean straightening out your act, or getting your life together, or behaving. Repenting...it's a kind of promise. Sort of like that dip in the lake or stepping under the shower and having all that dust and grime just washed away and having a fresh start.

Repentance is starting over.

Repentance, Scene 2: You might have noticed what John calls the crowds of people who come to hear him and see him and be baptized by him: He calls them a brood of vipers, the offspring of snakes....and that's no way to attract a crowd or gather up a following, is it? We could put it on the sign in front of the church: "All welcome! You brood of vipers!"

And then John asks them a simple question: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Now we could get all hung up in trying to figure out what "the wrath to come" might be: Is it the judgement day, is it some kind of divine punishment, is it being cut down and thrown into the fire with the other bad trees, like John seems to hint will happen? Maybe when John says it he's talking about some kind of crackdown by the Roman Imperial army.

But maybe that's not the point. Maybe the important question for us is simply "Who warned you to flee?" You bunch of snakes, who warned you to flee?" And just imagine for a minute: This isn't a picture of cobras rearing to strike or a rattlesnake giving you a warning shake of the tail. This is snakes wriggling through the grass to get away from the threat that's walking down the trail

toward them. And John says, “Who warned you to flee? Who told you to spend your life wriggling away from something? He’s not saying anything about fleeing from tornadoes or floods or violence in your home or community – you have to hear those warnings and run – but who told you that fleeing from something is what life is all about?”

You know what the things are that make you want to run away, to scurry away like a snake getting away from whatever is rustling in the grass your way. I have a pretty good idea what makes me want to get away... “But Paul, who warned you to flee? Who ever said that the way to respond to life or to worry or to fear is to flee?” As a congregation or a larger church or as a society we hear the same question: “Who told you to run away?” Sure, we’re afraid of a virus, we’re anxious about its economic impact, and in the church we try to scurry away from decline or hard questions about our future, and John says, “Who warned you to flee?” And it’s such a simple question, and the only thing to do is to stop fleeing. You see, when we flee we lose sight of what’s behind us, and when we flee we lose sight of who has been left behind.

So stop fleeing. That’s repentance too: Just stop running. This life of ours, this good gift of life, isn’t all about running from fear, even if that fear is real. Repentance: Just stop fleeing. We don’t need to flee.

Repentance, Scene number 3: Once John has stopped preaching the crowd says “So what should we do?” And John just says, “If you’ve got two coats and someone has none, give one away. If you have more food than you need, do the same. Don’t bully and harangue for your own benefit, be satisfied with what

you've got." Stop running. Turn around. See who's behind. Be generous. Be kind.

That's repentance too. What would happen if, every time any of us had to make a decision we asked, "What then should we do?" And what if the answer was always the same? Be generous, be gracious, be content, do what's good for your neighbour.

I'm worried about whether I'll have enough for retirement, what should I do? Be generous, be gracious, do what's best for your neighbour. I'm getting so old. Be generous, do what's best for your neighbour. Being so young is so hard. BE generous, be kind. What's in the future for our church, what's happening to us? Be generous, be kind, do what's best for your neighbour. The economy, it's really in trouble. Be generous, be kind, do what's best for your neighbour. There's this anger and this fear over viruses and vaccinations and travel and... everything...what should we do? Be generous, be kind, be content, be good to each other.

There will always be something we fear. And it's messy and difficult to sort it all out and to find good solutions and to make something good out of life – life for me, for you, life together anywhere. But John suggests that we stop running. That's repentance. Life is made rich when we stop running, and turn around, and try out the ancient and strong and life-giving gift of generosity.

So think of generosity you have received. Think of when someone has been gracious or kind to you or when you have been able to be generous yourself. Think of news we heard during the worst of the flooding in BC when people opened their homes and their fridges and their communities to people who had no choice but to run. If we watch and listen over these next days we will no doubt

hear about great generosity in a place like Mayfield, Kentucky, while neighbours give to neighbours who have nothing left, while kindness keeps rising up when there's just fear all around.

That's repentance. Stop running. Turn around. Be gracious.

Because there is one we wait for – Jesus – who is coming into the world with a strong gift of generosity, and kindness, and the sometimes difficult work of doing what's best for his neighbour. There is one we wait for now during this season who will come into the world and will – yes, even Jesus will - want to turn away from scary things yet to come; but who will instead turn to us, turn to a world broken by fear.

When we stop fleeing, and turn around to see what makes us most afraid, we see that Jesus is already there, meeting us in the middle of all that...giving that ancient and strong gift of generosity and grace and what's best for the ones around him, giving his life so that our world might be filled not with fear, but with life. AMEN.