

JANUARY 31, 2021 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS

Good morning! Welcome! Today is the second in the Upside Down King series as we delve into the ministry and teaching of Jesus as told in the gospel of Luke. We hope you can be reading along at home with the selections that are suggested for each week.

Let's take a moment now to turn on cameras if you can or you wish – and greet each other.

Our Call to Worship this morning is from the new Voices Together resource. Please join me:

Leader: If you are delighted to be here, and if you are tired or troubled,

All: You are welcome.

Leader: If your faith is strong, and if your faith is battered or frail,

All: You are welcome.

Leader: If you are eager to Praise God, and if you need to be quiet

All: You are welcome. God welcomes us all to worship today and promises to meet us here.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for welcoming us – and for your promise that you will meet us here. In fact, you've promised that you'll be with us ALL the time and wherever we are – even if we're at the ends of the earth. So thank you for being with us now, from all the different places we're at, tuning in to worship, to pray, to sing, to hear your word and equip ourselves for another week of following your son Jesus, the upside down king. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER

An additional prayer concern this morning is for the family of Willard Regier who passed away early yesterday morning at Bethesda. I invite you to pray with me.

God, we bow in prayer this morning bringing with us whatever it is we carry in our hearts. Some of us are delighted – perhaps we're feeling particularly blessed and fortunate because we're healthy and our loved ones are healthy. Perhaps we're delighted because we have jobs that we can depend on, that help us to earn a sustainable living. Maybe we're delighted by our children or grandchildren, feeling especially grateful for their presence in our lives. We thank you especially for Lillian and Greyson and their forever family with Matt and Laura. We pray your continued blessings on them as their family of four becomes their known and trusted "normal". Continue to give Matt and Laura calm wisdom, a sense of your peace and companionship on this parenting journey. Thank you, God, for these rich and wonderful gifts of delight and gratitude. It's important to recognize and give thanks the things for which we are deeply grateful. We offer a prayer of thanksgiving for Susan Voth and her family – for the loving memories and bonding relationships they share of Irvin and with one another. We thank you for Irvin's life and ask that you would be especially close to Susan and her family as they return to their lives having celebrated together.

God, some of us are tired or troubled this morning. We bring that to you also and in the spirit of humility and knowing our need for you, we ask you to carry the exhaustion, the discouragement, or the doubts that we bring. We are tired of the covid-19 virus and the damage it does. Tired of grieving and worrying, of isolating and masking, tired and troubled by the conflict it has created in our nation, our community and in some cases our families. We ask that your Spirit of compassion and grace might find ways to seep into our most stubborn and strong-willed places. We ask for mercy and healing, for willingness to listen to one another even when it feels like we may be speaking different languages or coming to a conversation with completely different understandings of Truth or reality. Lord God, help us to value one another, to respect and try to understand one another. Help us to stay focused on Jesus and on how he has called us to live.

We pray for those who are hurting this morning. Be with LaNae and Steve and with Julia as they mourn the loss of Willard. We thank you for his life and we ask for comfort in this time of adjusting to his absence. We pray for Radene and her family as they deal with multiple losses this last week, of LeRoy Duerksen and Lola Unruh. Be with all of them as they struggle to wrap their minds around these deaths. We continue to pray for the residents and staff at Bethesda, at Kidron-Bethel, at Schowalter Villa, at Presbyterian Manor at Asbury Park and other long-term care facilities.

O God, we pray for Janice and Delton and their family as Janice undergoes surgery on Tuesday. Be with her and give her your peace. We pray for her surgeon and the other medical folks who will tend to her – help them to use their best skill and know-how for Janice’s health and well-being. We give you thanks, God, for the healing and strength that Joyce Bergen has gained. We ask for perseverance and continued strength for her so that she can go home. Continue to be with Dan, with Jenny and Greg and the grandchildren.

Strengthen all of our faith, God. Let us find our hope in you. Let us care for one another and for this earth, in ways that make real our interconnectedness. Bless our eagerness and our quietness as both are expressions of our humanity. Bless the offerings that we give and us in the act of giving, that we may honor you and share your love. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

THE WAY OF THE LORD – PASTOR CALEB

LUKE 3:1-14, 21-22

Most of you know Carol Duerksen and Maynard Knepp who live in this community.

Carol tells a story of a time when Maynard went in with a work colleague who was a Hispanic woman. They were wishing to return some new items that had been donated to MCC but wouldn’t work for their intended purposes.

When the Hispanic woman asked to make the returns, she was flatly refused. So, a bit later, Maynard – a bald white guy—tried, and it was done without question.

This wasn’t just or fair.

We all know our world is an unjust world. My point is not to bemoan that fact, but ask what the story of Jesus has to say about it.

We rightly believe that faith in Jesus if its in all seriousness changes our individual lives. It transforms us both now and beyond this life.

But the New Testament gives us plenty of reasons to see this transformation extend to our relationships, our peace and justice-making, and to the imprint that God intends for the church to have in our unjust world.

We are going to see that Jesus had quite the radical teaching – an upside-down kind of teaching that transforms us.

Our worship series is called “the Upside Down King,” drawing from the musical of that name and a Bible study curriculum that Carol Duerksen developed later.

The musical begins with the forlorn pair of disciples traveling to Emmaus, in grief because of Jesus’ death. They meet a mysterious traveler, and begin to tell their companion all about Jesus, from the beginning of his ministry.

This takes them back to this strange guy named John the Baptist – living in the desert and eating locusts and wild honey is beyond what I’d call “roughing it.”

The Gospel of Luke tells us it all started in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

There was no standard calendar back then; you couldn’t say: “it was the year 28 AD,” so this is how you would date things.

I think that Luke is already turning things “upside-down.” Luke painstakingly lists all these important and powerful men: Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, his brother Philip, two other tetrarchs, and the high-priests Annas and Caiaphas.

Then we pause for dramatic effect....

“And the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

Not to any of the important and powerful men, but to a guy doing his hard-core cleanse diet of locusts and honey.

A few weeks ago, pastor Lois taught us about how the prophet Amos warned of a famine of hearing the word of the Lord.

In the Gospel, we get this hint that we got to get a little off the beaten path to hear God speak, or else we will be too distracted, too immersed in our unjust world to hear.

In Jesus’ day, the Romans were in charge. They may have been known for their roads and aqueducts, but the Romans were ruthless rulers, great at using subordinates like Herod and Pilate to keep the population in line, while they milked as much taxes as they could out of the people.

If the story of the Old Testament is dominated by Exodus from slavery in Egypt and return from Exile in Babylon.

It helps to remember people in Jesus' day, felt like they were both slaves and exiles in their own land.

They were waiting for a renewal movement that would launch a new Exodus. Maybe that's why they are drawn to this rough-cut John guy.

It's like a colony fighting for freedom from the colonial power or like. Or closer to home, we might hear the narrative of oppression by giant corporate players, unpredictable markets, taxes, and government overreach conspiring to prevent honest people from making a good living from their own hard work.

The Gospel writers all associate John with the prophecy from Isaiah:

*"A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.
⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.*

When we looked at this prophecy during Advent, we saw that the prophet was proclaiming a return from exile, with a smooth-grade highway – metaphorically anyway – constructed for God to return to Israel.

As people come out to John in the wilderness, he doesn't exactly offer a "welcoming" revival service – you know with a stellar worship band, comfy seats, and a coffee bar.

John actually insults those who come to be baptized: *"you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"*

Maybe John was the master of reverse psychology.

We humans often need ritual in order to truly be all in – head, heart, and body – with something new.

Baptism as such didn't exist in the Old Testament, but it's a ritual of purification and penance probably connected to Old Testament laws of purification and washing.

When John offers people this cleanse ritual of baptism, it's likely not just about individual sins.

As US Americans, we bring this distorted individual lens to our reading of the Bible.

Folks in Jesus' day are looking for God to forgive their national sins, to remove any barrier to launching this new Exodus.

The ritual of baptism is intended to effect a change of status before God, but without the sincere repentance, the ritual does no good.

Maybe John's harsh words are because he thinks some of the folks coming out to him aren't sincere. He tells them to produce fruit in keeping with "repentance."

So what is repentance?

Repentance is a strong word, and some of you might have unpleasant associations with it.

In the Old Testament, the concept was basically one of changing course, turning, doing a 180.

In the New Testament, the word *metanoia* literally means "after-thought" or "change of mind." I think of Romans 12:2, which says "*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*"

Repentance is a change of mind, a change of sight, that leads to change of action.

What kind of repentance is John calling for?

John doesn't say anything about being diligent about having your quiet time to pray and read the Bible – as important as that can be.

John talks about pragmatic and social righteousness.

Giving your clothes to those who have none and your food to the hungry.

Some of the folks coming to be baptized are tax collectors and soldiers – ironically those who are in collusion with the oppressive system!

John doesn't turn them away, or even tell them they must completely leave their station in life.

But he doesn't tell them to just pray, read their Bibles, and attend church either.

John calls them to costly changes of behavior, in keeping with the revolution that is to come.

Tax collectors are to stop collecting extra. Soldiers – who received very little pay – are to stop extorting, accepting bribes – common tactics from police, military, and vigilante groups in many countries of the world today.

CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

John didn't let anyone off the hook. Most of his listeners were Jews, and could claim to be "children of Abraham."

John says, "So? God can make children of Abraham out of rocks!"

How do we hear this, as a Mennonite congregation that is also tied to a long history? Many of us were born into this faith, and come from families that have been Mennonite Christians for generations.

We don't have automatic approval from having Mennonite roots, years of church membership, having the right set of views, having life achievements, etc.

There is no substitute for genuine transformation and bearing of fruit in keeping with that transformation.

So what should *we* do? What should *you* do?

I'm not I'm in the position to fully answer that for you. It's a question that I have to put back to you, and would be happy to hear your thoughts.

I find the idea of social righteousness very challenging.

The statements – give your second shirt to those who have none, and your extra food to the hungry are incredibly radical.

Of course, many of us donate to the Etc. Shop and to the food pantry, so we aren't completely removed from this. We also understand how complicated poverty is, and the fact that poverty has many layers that we don't attend to just by giving things away.

We need on-going relationship with the poor, or with those who struggle.

Nevertheless, the simple radicalism of John came home for me when I encountered these quotes from early Christian teachers.

From Ambrose, in the late fourth century: *"you are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his.... The world is given to all, and not only to the rich."*

And even stronger words from Basil of Caesaria, also fourth century: *"The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you put into the bank belongs to the poor."*¹

I don't give you these words as a hotshot preacher trying to say something challenging. These words condemn me as much as they probably condemn any of you.

I appreciate these words from Drew Hart that remind us that it starts with what we practice and do in the life of the church.

*"We must be willing to embody the justice that we, as local churches, desire from the broader society, rather than asking more of society than the church is willing to live itself."*²

John's simple radicalism has to first take root within we who call ourselves followers of Jesus as we relate to one another and our world.

JESUS' BAPTISM

We haven't talked about Jesus' own baptism. It is a big surprise that Jesus shows up lining up with the rest to get baptized.

Many people have wondered why Jesus got baptized if he was without sin? Why would Jesus need a ritual of penance?

¹ Both early church leaders cited in Hart, Drew. *Who will be a witness? Igniting activism for God's justice, love, and deliverance*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2020, p. 249

² Ibid, p. 35

Maybe it is because the baptism is as much about corporate repentance as individual repentance, so Jesus wants to signal that his movement is fully aligned with John's renewal movement.

At Jesus' baptism we have the rare reference in scripture to all three persons of the trinity at once: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in this case in the bodily form of a dove.

I'll come back to Jesus' baptism and the words God speaks in a bit.

CONCLUSION

I want to leave us with two practices to take with us.

The first is to explore your own life as it relates to the circles of close relationships, church, community or world, and God.

Where are you bearing fruit? Where are you not bearing fruit?

Carol's curriculum suggests the very hands-on practice of drawing and cutting out a tree with different branches. Label the branches as areas of your life that are either bearing fruit or not. Cut off the branches that are dormant.

Maybe in our busyness, this is almost an impossible exercise without a way of retreating into a "wilderness" kind of place to reflect and assess what you are doing.

For some of us, the pandemic has foisted that kind of space, but not necessarily for all of us.

Secondly, I want to offer you a simple prayer practice to stay grounded in the root of the tree or the vine who is Christ.

At his baptism, God speaks these words to Jesus: "You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

I don't think it's inappropriate to apply these words to ourselves. It might seem counterintuitive, because Jesus is Jesus and we are not.

Yet the goal of our salvation is to discover Jesus' way of being human and come to the same sort of relationship with God as Jesus had.

The New Testament uses language like being adopted as sons and daughters of God, or becoming co heirs of Christ to get at this.

Ed Czerwinski writes: *"Before Jesus preached about the kingdom, healed the sick, or dined with the outcast, he received affirmation from God. Because of that affirmation, he had nothing to prove. His identity was secure, and there was nothing anyone could give to him or take away from him that mattered more than the loving affirmation of the Father."*³

³ Czerwinski, Ed. *Flee, be silent, pray: ancient prayers for anxious Christians*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019; page

As a prayer practice, I've adapted this prayer to imagine the words of God as "you are my son (or daughter). I love you. You're enough."

I receive these words with the rhythm of my breath, during exercise, sitting in silence, or at any time of day.

It may seem counter-intuitive to tell yourself "you're enough," if you are also looking to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

Isn't that just settling? Isn't that making excuses?

I see it as a reset button. A way to draw strength from the Source of life – the vine itself, while we are the branches.

We can always try to do good works, but we can't discover and sustain a genuine transformation through our heart, mind, and body without that spiritual connectedness to the Source of life.

God is well-pleased with us, not because we do everything right – of course not! But because we simply are – we are God's creatures – *and* because God can see who we have the potential to become and delights in that already.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. John the Baptist was definitely not mainstream. Who are the marginal voices today that may or may not be heard or respected by you or your church?
2. John spent a lot of time in the wilderness and seemed to draw strength from his unusual lifestyle. What are the unusual places and moments that give you strength for your spiritual journey?
3. What is significant about Jesus receiving God's blessing at baptism before beginning his ministry?
4. *What would John say to us if we asked him: "what shall we do?"*

BENEDICTION

May you know yourself to be God's beloved child in whom God is already pleased.

May the Spirit lead you to produce fruit in keeping with your transformation