

12/04/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Phyllis Voth was admitted to the NMC on Friday late afternoon with respiratory illness. She's improving and was in fairly good spirits when I saw her last evening.

Joy to the world – indeed! O God, we thank you for sending Jesus into the world so that humanity could know the fullness of your joy. We pray for watchful and expectant hearts that make us receptive to the miracle of your coming.

We thank you for the joy of the wedding celebration of Lucas and Michelle yesterday. Bless them and their families as they begin this new part of their journey together.

Dear God, we thank you for healing and recuperation that has happened and continues to happen for those who've been sick. We pray for those within our families and our communities who are still struggling to recover from illness. We think of those who have sick children and are sleep deprived, we pray for parents who are sick themselves, and for those who are needing to isolate as they recover and, therefore, are missing out on plans or special occasions. We pray especially for Phyllis Voth this morning as she's in the hospital; grant her your strength and healing as she recovers.

And in the midst of illness and recovery, we know, God that it's moving quickly toward the end of the semester at school. And so we pray for students and teachers as they prepare for these final weeks before the break. Give each one perseverance and motivation. We pray for clear thoughts and healthy minds and bodies to carry them through.

We pray for those who carry heavy burdens of poverty or hardship in this season – those whose joy may be diminished by the anxiety of not having enough or of having great debt or medical issues. We pray for those whose burden is living in the midst of violence or war. For some, this is violence experienced at home, for others it may be the violence of bullying. We pray for Ukraine and the violence being imposed on them. We pray for Palestine and other places where one people group is violently occupying the lives and space of others. We pray for Haiti and all places where people are struggling for their autonomy and independence. O God, we pray for the millions of displaced people all over the world – those who have fled their homes out of fear for their safety. We pray for those who are climate refugees – those who have fled because the earth can no longer sustain them in places that had been their home.

And we offer a prayer of confession, God. For the ways we are complicit – intentionally or unintentionally, willfully or in ways that are beyond our knowledge or control – ways that we

contribute to the larger, systemic injustices in this world. We pray for mercy. We pray that your truth would be spoken and heard with willing hearts seeking your shalom.

We are grateful for people and organizations that are working in the world for peace and the well-being of all. We pray especially for the Mennonite Mission Network worker mentioned in our bulletin who is based in the UK but travels widely. Grant her safety and encouragement. Bless each person and organization doing your work. May they may be motivated by the power of your Holy Spirit and may their work inspire us to share your longing for restoration. We pray in Jesus' name.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

O God,

We claim to believe in your Messiah – the one given a spirit of wisdom and understanding, who does justice for the poor and needy, the one who transforms the world until wolves and lambs live together, calf and lion graze together, and none are harmed.

As we prepare the way for Christ within ourselves, may we use our money and resources not only for our own interests but as an expression of hope in the world to come.

We pray that the gifts we offer this day serve your purposes.

Amen

PREPARING OURSELVES – PASTOR CALEB

Matthew 3:1-12, Isaiah 11:1-10

Can you imagine a world where wolves and lambs resided together without any harm coming to the lambs? Or where a toddler could put their hand into a den of vipers without concern?

This vision of a different kind of world is speaking in a metaphor of course, but the point is that we live in a dog-eat-dog world, where some people devour other people. And the prophet envisioned a time when the world would be different.

Last week, I talked about how Jesus called his followers to live in the threshold space between the world as it is and the age to come – the kingdom of God that is near. So we live in this in-between space, anticipating the “world to come” by orienting our spiritual eyesight to that world, and choosing to live with intentionality and readiness.

So this week, we have another prophet. All four of the Gospels mention John the Baptist. We've heard this story enough time, that we have really domesticated this guy in our minds.

When I lived in Central America, occasionally there would be apocalyptic street pictures, usually seeming like they were on some substance, with a circle of people gathering around. I usually kept my distance, and I really can't say whether I'd want to get dunked under water – and maybe held there – by a guy who wore camel hair and got his protein from locusts.

Maybe those things wouldn't have struck people as so unusual. There was a clearly a hunger for John's preaching and interest in the ritual of baptism, because lots of people were gathering to listen.

His message was simple: "Repent!" "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" And people confessed their sins as he dunked them in the Jordan river.

John wasn't the first person to think of baptizing people out in the desert. There were a number of Jewish groups that separated themselves out in the desert to wait for the Kingdom of God.

The most well-known of these is the Essene community that produced the "Dead Sea scrolls." Many of these groups practiced ritual cleansing with water.

John is unique, because his baptism is a one-time event signaling a real change in direction. He talks about fiery judgment. The ax is ready to chop down the tree unless it starts bearing fruit.

There used to be an apple orchard that was in the family just past the house where I grew up. But in the time I can remember, they were never apples that were good enough to eat, and apparently not for applesauce either.

I don't know if it was neglect or if these were just old trees that were past their time. But every year, the apples would fall to the ground, and I'd mow over them, making a slushy mess that the mower wheels would spin in. Eventually the orchard was cut down, in order for the building for my dad's business to be constructed on the land there.

John was especially harsh toward the Pharisees and Sadducees. Perhaps they came just for the spectacle? At any rate, John retorted to them, *"Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones."*

Yep, a pretty fiery character.

People appealed to being a child of Abraham – they appeal to some kind of insider status apart from whether they actually live out the faith. John's right that you can get children from stones. In Hebrew, "stones" are "abanim" and "sons" are "banim," so you can literally get "banim" from "abanim." Kind of like in English, you might say that to "assume" makes a pretty stubborn animal out of you and me.

But really, what's meant by this is that you can't claim some special status just because of who you are. Being a "child of Abraham" was defining yourself over and against those who weren't.

It's like saying that being a direct descendant of the folks who migrated from the Molotschna colony to Kansas in 1874 – as valuable as remembering that history is – isn't what makes you a child of God, or a follower of Jesus, or valued part of this congregation.

You see, God has no limits on embracing and raising up children. To define yourself as good over against someone who supposedly isn't is to miss the whole point of conversion.

True conversion isn't a matter of despising yourself or thinking that you are just a worm. It is to give up the game of thinking that you are better than others or can be good apart from the goodness of God. Conversion is opening ourselves up to the messy truth of ourselves with the humility to seek to do better. To find our true selves in Christ. To seek to allow God's Spirit to do a good work in us.

John's vocation of preparing the way for the Messiah was not about making literal highways through the desert. It was about people preparing their own hearts. And John cut right to the point: "produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives." You only know if a person's words count if you see them reflected in their actions.

CONVERSION

The word "repentance" as well as "conversion" have a lot of baggage for people. Maybe you've been shamed by those words, or you associate them with a mean-spirited judgmentalism or colonialist mission.

The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, suggests a change of mind. It's more than just "changing your mind" or feeling bad about something you shouldn't have done.

It's a change of mindset, a different way of thinking, which is necessary to sustain a different course of action. The Hebrew word for "repent" at the most basic level means "turn." Change your direction. Go a different way.

John said, "I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives." Then he goes on to talk about the one who is coming.

This Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. "The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands." John's second image of judgment is the process of winnowing grain. Separating the grain from the husks that had encased it.

On the screen I have a picture I found of a winnowing fork from the Middle East. I guess you had to use that to toss the threshed grain into the air so that the breeze could blow away the chaff.

Today this concept feels foreign to us. We're glad we live in the 21st century. All the steps of reaping, threshing, and winnowing are combined in combines.

The updated translation would be that the Messiah will send out his Gleaner combine to cut the wheat. The combine will separate the wheat from the husks, and husks will be spewed out the back of the machine.

I came upon a reflection by Bob Ekblad in his prison ministry about the chaff or husk of the wheat being the self-protective part of the grain. Ekblad told the guys serving time that baptism is surrendering our "self-protective attitudes and practices." That includes our self-narratives about being better or entitled or deserving or in control.¹

¹ See <https://bobekblad.com/burning-the-chaff/>

By becoming husk-less, we are naked and vulnerable, but also in the position for God's Spirit to do a work in us.

ISAIAH

So coming back to Isaiah for a minute, the prophet casts a vision of a future ruler in the line of the renowned King David, who will rule justly, wisely, and compassionately, and usher in a time of peace so profound that there is no longer the strong oppressing the vulnerable. The lion and calf can feed side-by-side.

This kind of prophetic vision is the beginning stage of a centuries-long expectation of a Messiah. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse – Jesse was the father of King David. A stump appears to be dead, but you can unexpectedly have new shoots and branches come up. This fact is sometimes frustrating in the backyard when you want to get rid of a volunteer woody plant and it keeps sending up shoots from its root system.

No one will blame you if you feel there is a difference between John the Baptist and Isaiah. Or John the Baptist and Jesus. John the Baptist has judgment language of unfruitful branches and chaff being burned in unquenchable fire. Isaiah talks about children hanging on the inside of the cage with lions and leopards.

John seems to expect a Messiah who will violently do away with bad people, while the Jesus of the Gospels led a radical ministry of healing, dining with sinners, and dying on the cross for the very people who rejected him.

Why do we seem to have different descriptions of the Messiah? Will the real Messiah please stand up?

The Gospel of Matthew doesn't resolve the tension between these different understandings of the Messiah. Jesus himself spoke highly of John. John was an ally in proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Yet even John has doubts about Jesus.

In Matthew 11, John, who is now imprisoned, sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus doesn't seem to have completely met John's expectations, and to be honest, I'd be asking the same questions if I was imprisoned and about to get my head chopped off.

Jesus answered, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk... the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (Matt 11:4-6).

Jesus' ministry revealed God's love and restoration. But the Gospels still leave us with a lot of unanswered questions about how God will transform our present broken world into the age to come.

Maybe John's judgmental images of a Messiah with an ax, a Messiah with a winnowing fork, are truer to the ministry of Jesus than they seem to be at first glance. Jesus' ministry did do plenty of sorting, though maybe in a different way than John may have envisioned.

The word “apocalyptic” really refers not to the end of the world or terrible plagues, but to “revealing” things for what they are, beyond appearances. Jesus’ ministry revealed people for who they were. Could they recognize the presence of God in his upside-down ministry of embracing the “least”? Or would people feel threatened? Prefer to hold on to their self-protecting husks?

The folks in power rejected Jesus as a threat to their own use of religion as a tool to have power over people. Jesus’ baptism of the Spirit brought a wind that transformed people who would let themselves be transformed, like the breeze blowing away the husks.

Jesus’ baptism by fire was the test of people’s steadfastness when he went to the cross, and when those of us who follow afterward face our own hardships with his strength.

Conversion often follows experiences that reveal us in ways that aren’t flattering. A mini-conversion experience for me happened when I was teaching in Honduras. I was becoming increasingly frustrated with behavior issues from the kids and becoming angry with them.

The mother of the family I lived with could see I was becoming frustrated and tired and reminded me that these kids came from some rough home backgrounds, some had gone through situations of abuse. “You haven’t suffered,” she reminded me.

But the real impactful moment came I was having the kids write paragraphs on the computer, and one student wrote a sentence that described me as “enojado” – angry or irritable.

Was this how they had come to view me? What was I really accomplishing? That was the moment of revelation for me.

It helped me to put things into perspective to realize my goal was not to successful teach certain computer skills to the kids, but to show love and create positive experiences for them in the computer lab that would instill confidence in them that might serve to empower them in the future.

CONCLUSION

In order to prepare the way for Christ’s coming, we have to prepare ourselves.

That self-preparation means being able to examine ourselves, allow ourselves to be winnowed – revealed for what within us is genuine and what is false or chaff. That’s certainly a counter-cultural way of celebrating Advent.

This change is turning away from being focused on the way of life in the former world and converting into belonging to the second world, which is still on its way. We can’t welcome the new world without openness to change in ourselves.

We have to ask ourselves where we want to see change in our lives, as well as the systems we participate in.

Where is there brokenness in our relationships? How to do the inner work of being able to respond with wisdom, let go of resentment, release what is not in our control?

We also know there is collective or social sin, such as racism, overconsumption and environmental degradation, economic injustice. How do my priorities cut against the grain of these larger, bigger than us, sins, and how am I complicit or part of the problem?

There is no need to be laden with guilt or despair. But simply ask what is in our power to do? What fruit can we bear?

Let's pray for God's Spirit to bear fruit within us; Let's pray for God's Spirit to reveal what we need to confess and turn away from. Let's ask God to sift our hearts – which can be painful but is an expression of God's love – sift what is based on love and what is not, so that we can let Christ live within us.

BENEDICTION

Romans 15:5-6, 13

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.