

**"What should we do?"**  
**A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston**  
**Thomaston, Maine**  
**Sunday, January 13, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Scripture: Luke 3:7-18, 21-22**

Then [John the Baptist] said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?"

He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you."

Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?"

So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

And with many other exhortations he preached to the people....

When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from Heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."

Luke 3:7-18, 21-22 NKJV

Will you pray with me. Challenging God, you remind us of a wild and crazy preacher today. He insults people and they keep listening. Instead of showing him the way out the door, they ask him what they should do. Help us to keep our ears open, O God, even when we don't like the words of the preacher. Help us to keep asking what *we* should do, no matter how many checks we've written or how many boxes of food we have packed for others. Help us to find new energy from your word in the midst of always too much to do in our daily lives. Amen.

John the Baptist was one gutsy preacher! If I started out a sermon with the words, "YOU BROOD OF VIPERS! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?", you would probably begin whispering amongst yourselves that you thought I'd been working too hard. If I tried it again next Sunday, you would probably be thinking twice about coming to church the third Sunday, and maybe calling for an early pastoral review of your new interim minister!

Yes, John the Baptist was a gutsier preacher than I am, and he got away with it for a little while. But if you've read the rest of the story, you know preacher John lost his head, literally, in the midst of his ministry. And today, the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus in the Christian calendar of the year.

It's a strange mix of theme and story we read today, but perhaps no more strange than the themes and stories of the daily news reports of *our* time. Some days I think the only real difference between people and daily life now from Jesus' day is we have electricity and indoor

plumbing and they didn't. For all the rest, we have acts of kindness and great generosity occurring beside acts of immoral judgment and power-seeking, just as back then. We have stables of safe haven and hot soup beside locations of terrible poverty and injustice, just as back then. The human condition is filled with actions of amazing generosity and selflessness *and* unspeakable shame and egotism.

Maybe John the Baptist had already figured that out. Maybe he knew he could get away with calling his hearers a "brood of vipers," just to get their attention, because he also knew deep down inside of them there was something redeemable. Maybe he saw there were sparks of goodness, flickers of the light of God that refused to go out, even in people who seemed to be deaf to what he was trying to tell them -- about God, and the one who was coming to show them the way to new and better life.

It's hard to read our passage for today and not take note of the question asked. Do you remember what it is? (get responses) Upon hearing John's accusation, each of the three different groups of hearers asked, "What should we do?" (Lk 3:10, 12, 14)

First it was "the crowds," or "the people." And John said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." (Lk 3:11) I think "the crowds" or "the people," for the most part, are supposed to be us. Generosity is to become our watchword. Giving to others, particularly to those in the greatest need, is to be our daily task. From what I can tell so far, you all do a very fine job of carrying out that holy work here.

Second John heard the question from the tax collectors, an outcaste group of people back then. Would we call them "the IRS" today? Maybe. But maybe, too, they are business people, corporations, governments who take more than they need to stay afloat in business, who carry out corrupt and greedy practices. John said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." (Lk 3:13) Do your business right. Don't cut corners. Always be fair and honest in your transactions. Think about more than your shareholders stock value.

Third John heard the question from soldiers, another outcaste group in Jesus' day, and perhaps a surprising group to be included among John's hearers. He answered them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusations, and be satisfied with your wages." (Lk 3:14) Don't lord your power over others. Don't persecute those whom you are supposed to protect. Don't expect to be paid millions when you and many others can live on a whole lot less.

John the Baptist came and baptized people -- no matter who they were, or where they were on life's journey -- and called them to repent of their sins and go forward doing good things. He called them to turn their backs on selfishness and greed, immoral and unjust behaviors, and power hungry motives. He called them to turn around, and see God's kingdom of goodness and generosity and well being right before their eyes, perhaps even in one another.

And so, verse eighteen for today reads, "So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people." (Lk 3:18) There is joy in this message. It seems so simple, and yet we find it hard to believe and carry out today.

And then, we read of Jesus' baptism. We don't know if that followed immediately after John's fiery sermon, but it probably wasn't long after. Jesus' baptism is detailed in all four of the Gospels, which tells us the Gospel writers all thought it was important to report.

Baptism, it is one of the two sacraments of the Protestant tradition. The other is Holy Communion. Baptism is that visible sign and action of an invisible grace available to each and all of us. Jesus received it. Probably most if not all of us here this morning received it.

Do you remember your baptism? I don't, but I know it happened because I found my baptismal certificate in my parents' papers after they died. I was baptized when I was an infant in a service in a United Methodist Church in Wheeling, West Virginia. It seems fitting to me that I am now serving as your Interim Minister, with this church being both United Methodist and United Church of Christ in composition and denomination!

My favorite theologian and writer, Fred Buechner, gives this definition of baptism: "Baptism consists of getting dunked or sprinkled. Which technique is used matters about as much as whether you pray kneeling or standing on your head. Dunking is a better symbol, however. Going under symbolizes the end of everything about your life that is less than human. Coming up again symbolizes the beginning in you of something strange and new and hopeful. You can breathe again."<sup>1</sup>

In eighteen years of ministry I only officiated one baptism by immersion. One of our older members in Lincolnville told me he didn't know if he had ever been baptized and he wanted to be baptized by going down into the water. I tried to explain to him that in the UCC tradition, we baptized with drops of water on one's forehead. He was politely insistent that I consider immersing him in Coleman Pond in Lincolnville.

So, I consulted with a clergy colleague, who happened to be United Methodist minister. I asked her if she had ever officiated a baptism by immersion like this. She responded, "Yes! Do it, Susan!" And so I did. First I sewed fishing weights into the hem of one of my robes so that it wouldn't billow up in the pond. Then I asked for the assistance of one of our members who had participated in baptisms by immersion in her prior faith community. I'll never forget the experience -- as Edgar came up out of the pond, after all three of us almost went under, he said, with water dripping from his exquisite handlebar mustache, "Now THAT'S a baptism!"

Our text for this morning from the Gospel of Luke tells us, "When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from Heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." (Lk 3:21-22) Now THAT'S a baptism!

May we all think of *our* baptisms as we remember John the Baptist's answer to the people's question, "What should we do?"

Let the people say, "Amen."

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC, Revised and Expanded*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1973, 1993, p. 6.