

Call to Worship Isaiah 42:1-4

But here is my servant, the one I uphold; my chosen, who brings me delight. I've put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations.

He won't cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. He won't break a bruised reed; he won't extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice.

He won't be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land.

The coastlands await his teaching.

Prayer of Invocation

God, we see the former things that have come to pass. We are ready to celebrate the new things as you reveal them. As they spring forth, let us come together to share the your Eternal word.

We raise our eyes to you, renewing God, and pray that once more you guide and direct our worship. Make our words your words, our song the song of heaven, our silences a rich soil that your vision may be planted within us, and our prayers a reflection of your will for our lives. This we pray in your name. Amen.

The Word Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ.

John replied to them all, "I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out."

When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Living the Word

It has been fun for me during Advent and Christmas to do the research of the hymns and explore what the poets had in mind that tells of our faith. One of my former Confirmands reminded me that not everything in print, though we read or sing it, is how he experiences his faith.

It scares me to think that I might put words in your mouth that you don't agree with. I take care that the call to worship and the prayers will express where we are or where we should be going. Some things we sing or say should make us uncomfortable as we are always working to be more in-line with God's will for us.

It is easy and lazy of us when we just read or sing without any care for the words and what they express about us. Today we will move from the words of the hymns, but I hope as you sing, you will continue to pick a phrase that might stand out to you and process it during the week. Each week the hymns are themed with the scriptures and sermon, to help our brains come together in thought.

So moving from the hymns, today we are going to do 'a walk through the scriptures.' I hope that you can get a feel for a moment in time by learning the background, placement and some of the meaning of that moment. I assume you know parts of the story, but possibly we can bring it together in some semblance of order and relate it to ourselves and our lives. You are welcome to follow along – Luke 3 in the pew Bibles.

How many of you have cousins? At a recent funeral I attended, I heard stories of the cousins growing up together, Cousin Jack even gave a short genealogy, explaining the family relations. Specifically, he shared how the younger cousins looked up to the older cousins. I know that in my family, I was one of the oldest cousins,

so I looked up to the youngest aunt and uncle. Often when we look back we can see how we build our lives on the model of those who have gone before us.

Luke begins with the story of the relationship of John and Jesus

It is a cousin story, with Elizabeth, who for years was unable to get pregnant, is now pregnant in her old age with John. Mary, Elizabeth's cousin is also pregnant, some would say before her time as she was unwed. We know that before the two boys were born, Mary traveled to see Elizabeth, which may not have been possible after Jesus' birth, so the boys may not have been playmates. But they were kin and knew each other's story, knew they each were of special birth, and destined for some sort of greatness.

Luke then jumps from the birth stories to 30 years later

In Luke we do have the story of Jesus in the temple at age 12, but nothing else about his childhood or his teen years. Wouldn't it be fascinating to know what Jesus was like as a teenager? Was he quiet and reflective or hanging with the right crowd? Did he always do the right thing or did he test the waters of life, like teens often do?

But we have very little of this recorded for us. Jesus' life was recorded for us to tell of his ministry here on earth. That ministry didn't begin until he, and John were 30 years old and then it only lasted a few years. Still, we have plenty to give us a picture of each of their teachings and work.

How many of you have one of those odd ball relatives, who dresses funny, does weird things and people sort of aren't sure about them? That was John: Camel's hair coat, with a leather belt, eating locust and wild honey. He was a little rough around the edges... Luke gives us John's ministry in chapter 3:3 "*John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.*"

The people's expectation of a Messiah

For centuries the oppressed Hebrew people had prayed for a Messiah. Now word was circulating that the ancient scriptures had been fulfilled in the birth of a special child. They were anxious with anticipation of the ministry to come. When they heard John speak of heart and life changes along with statements against the government, they thought he was the one that they had been waiting so long for.

Just like today, when we speculate on who someone might be, we can imagine one or two of the people saying "Do you think he is the one?" and then all of them debating over coffee, the possibility. The whisper going around the community for a while before it got back to John. We all like to have our thoughts confirmed before we say anything, just in case we don't have it right. Of course, when we are right, we are sure to let everyone know it was our thought first. That is just who we are as humans...

When it finally got back to John, he assured them that he was not the Messiah, but living out the words of the prophet that said "*This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet, A voice crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight.*"

⁵ *Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

The crooked will be made straight and the rough places made smooth.

⁶ *All humanity will see God's salvation."*

John used water to cleanse the sin

John was not the Christ, but had come to prepare the way for the Christ. We might label John a fire and brimstone preacher. He called the people 'vipers.' He told them they had to repent – change their ways- look at what they were doing and see that the Messiah was indeed coming and they were not ready.

Since John there have been many preachers like him. They pound the pulpit and condemn the people. Since Jesus' ministry, I understand that we are all sinners, making wrong choices because we are human and there

is still much we can do to change our hearts and our lives. We should indeed always be aware of, and sorry for, our mistakes. But we are forgiven over and over.

I have even been asked on occasion if I won't do some pulpit pounding, but I find for the most part, it to be nonproductive. It isn't the ministry that I believe is needed today. Having said that if you would like some 'in your face' ministry, I believe you wouldn't have to go too far down the road to find a church that would oblige you in that. Also, there are some topics like Missions, and Christian Education, which I am very passionate about and can even get a bit worked up over.

John used water to baptize them when they were ready, to cleanse them of their sins. But he informed the crowd that Jesus would come with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus and the fire of the Holy Spirit

Those people had no idea what John meant by the Holy Spirit. They hadn't identified yet, what the Holy Spirit was or how it worked in their lives. Two thousand years have gone by and I am not sure we have a good handle on it even now.

Jesus came to help us put the past behind us through forgiveness and to show us that our God is a God of second, third and fourth chances. Through Jesus we were taught that we are never alone and that the Holy Spirit would guide us, inspire us and point us in the right direction as we go.

When someone gives me a compliment about a worship service or a sermon, I thank God that what I do, can help guide another. I say "if it is good, then it is of God, if not, then it is probably from me." It is difficult to wrap our minds around... but all good that we are able to accomplish, comes to us by way of the Holy Spirit. We cannot take credit for anything, as any 'good job congrats,' belong to God.

The Shovel for Sifting

John is quoted as telling the people that "*The shovel [Jesus] uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out.*"

How many here were raised on a farm? Anyone remember using or seeing a winnowing fork or shovel? I know it was before my time...According to Wikipedia, 'Winnowing is a farming method developed by ancient cultures for separating grain from chaff. It is also used to remove weevils or other pests from stored grain. In its simplest form it involves throwing the mixture into the air so that the wind blows away the lighter chaff, while the heavier grains fall back down for recovery.'

Like Jesus, John is using a common image from that time period to illustrate his point that Jesus will know how to separate the good from the bad. As for burning the husks, that was also common practice and John was speaking of dire consequences for those who would not change themselves and be ready for the Messiah when he arrived.

Today's lectionary passage leaves out three verses. If you are following along in the pew Bible, it is verses 18-20. They read like this: ¹⁸ "With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people. ¹⁹ But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. ²⁰ [Herod] added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison."

End of John's ministry, beginning of Jesus' ministry

John's work was to wash them clean of the past, preparing the way for the coming Son of God, who would be greater than himself. We, like John are also to teach forgiveness and second chances, preparing for Christ in our lives and for some day the Second Coming of Christ.

Jesus' work was to help the people, and us, look forward, beyond the past. Because of the work of both, we know we are free from the guilt and shame of the past and if we allow change, enabled to be inspired for today, by the Spirit of God, when we allow it to lead us.

Jesus baptized with the people

Listen to this short sentence and what it tells us, Verse 21 reads: "*when everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized.*" Jesus didn't just walk up to the front of the line, he didn't pull cousin status, not even Son of God status. Jesus was baptized when everyone was being baptized. He didn't make a big deal about who he was, though John knew. Jesus made a point that he was human like all of them and all of us.

He then went right into prayer. Possibly all of the people went right into prayer, but for sure, that was Jesus first act after being baptized, to connect with the one who had sent him. I wonder how often God, our Creator waits for us to turn our hearts to prayer and reconnect. There is never a bad time to pray, there is never enough time to pray. Yet God is ever present, waiting for us to make the connection with whatever is going on in our lives moment by moment.

"While [Jesus] was praying, heaven was opened²² and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. The Holy Spirit in bodily form, so where is the fire? The flame of the Holy Spirit? It is there, filling Jesus as a symbol of peace descends from heaven. Reflecting on the fire and brimstone that John preached and then looking over the ministry of Jesus' preaching and teaching, a dove of peace does seem more appropriate. Jesus came to warn and forgive and preach heart changing, but even more to bring peace.

"And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." God gives Jesus' identity from heaven for all present... including us, to hear. But God has addressed Jesus, not us. The Creator is giving confidence and encouragement for the journey ahead to the Son who will need it as he goes.

In our baptism we are given the same blessing of God, to encourage and give us confidence on our journey. Most of us don't remember the blessing as we were infants at our baptism, but as we witness the baptism of all of the children of God, no matter what age they are, we should be hearing the blessing being re-given us - repeated again and again.

After these verses Luke lists for us the ancestral line of Jesus. This would be very important to the people of that day. Ironically, it is given through the father, Joseph, who indeed raised Jesus as his own, but was not truly the bloodline of Jesus, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Following this, Luke tells of Jesus' time in the wilderness, being tempted, before his ministry truly began.

We have now traveled through the verses we were given for this day. There is a lot here in just eight verses. We have reflected on the events... and honestly I am left with more questions. This week I leave you with this to think about:

How well do you know the stories and have you thought what they might mean for you?

Are you quick to acknowledge the Holy Spirit at work in your life?

How is your prayer connection with God?

As a Child of God, do you know how blessed and loved you are by your Creator?