**Baptism, a Revolutionary Act?**

**Epiphany, Narrative Lectionary**

**January 8, 2016**

Luke 3: 1-22

When we arrived in Regina in 2000, our boys had not been baptised. We were waiting to know what worshipping community we would be connected to before we made this commitment with them. Tyler was 9 and Cody was 5 on the Thanksgiving weekend that year, when we celebrated their baptism at Sunset United Church. My colleague, Lori Erhardt performed the baptism and as is the tradition, once she had baptised Cody, she picked him up and carried him into the congregation (he was a small 5 year old). When it was Tyler’s turn, who was a big 9 year old, after the act of baptism, Lori was walking Tyler into the congregation and Cody said, loudly, ‘aren’t you going to pick him up too?!’ He thought Tyler should have the same treatment and experience as him.

Baptism is about inclusion, welcome, and transformation. Today’s gospel story is about John the Baptist in the wilderness calling people to repent, to turn away from their sinful ways, to change and follow God. His message wasn’t just for the common people, it was for all. Even tax collectors and Roman Soldiers came to be baptized. John was harsh on those who he saw as the elite, and part of the corrupted system – the tax collectors, the Roman soldiers, the religious authorities who were watching from a distance. He called them a brood of vipers – the offspring of vipers, which was an insult to their parents, that they were vipers. Some of those there who heard this were moved and maybe scared enough by his message that they asked, what can we do? It wasn’t just baptism that John wanted, it was action. To the crowds, he told them if you have two coats, give one to someone who had none. A redistribution of wealth. To the tax collectors, he said, collect no more than the assessed amount from the people. Tax collectors were Jewish people hired by the Romans to collect taxes and could collect whatever they wanted as long as the amount taxed was forwarded to the Romans. They were reviled because of the extortion. To the soldiers, John told them be satisfied with their wages and not bribe those who are accused or causing trouble. They were known for extorting money from the people. John challenged all levels to create a more just and generous community. Baptism wasn’t and isn’t just about an act and a promise to turn around. It meant action, a real changing of our ways. What can you do? What actions can you take to live out your faith more fully? To work toward a more just and generous community and world?

John’s preaching challenged the present system and authorities. That is why Luke begins the chapter by naming those who are in power. It sets the story up for the context of who John is challenging. Not just government, but also religious authorities. He was challenging the way things worked at every level – personal, economic, political, religious. He gave them all examples of how they needed to change the way they lived and acted in order to prepare for what God was about to do through Jesus. So baptism was then, and has become now a revolutionary act, even a treasonous act. The vows demand we take sides, pledge allegiance against the claims of any other reign but God’s. Baptism means we are embracing as our priority, God, God’s creation, and each other working with God to bring about God’s Kingdom of Shalom, that generous and just community of love and compassion.

While I was in Ontario over the holidays, on Jan 1, the gas prices went up significantly due to a new carbon tax. There was a lot of grumbling about it including on the news. My reflection on this is that it is time we start paying more for gas and other carbon consumption, as it is the consequences of our over consumption over the years without real action. It is a tough and hard reality, but we also need to care for the earth as part of our faith. The same goes for the other realities and challenges we face in our time – racism, including following up on the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; sexism, including for example, addressing with our young men the realities of rape culture; homophobia and transphobia including creating safe spaces for transgender folk in our schools and churches. Our faith calls us to act, in personal transformation, prayer, and spiritual practice, and also in action for creating a better world.

John in his call to repentance and baptism was transforming an already existing practice. The Jewish practiced ritual cleansing as a symbol of cleansing from sin, but this was done individually. What was new was that John himself dipped people under the water, gaining himself the nickname John the ‘dipper’ or in traditional terms ‘baptiser’. Forgiveness of sin is not new either, as there are many examples in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition of forgiveness of sins. It was the way John did it that was new. What is also interesting given our understanding of Jesus, is that Jesus came to be baptised as well. Traditionally Jesus is understood, by the church, as being without sin, yet he comes to John who is calling on repentance and baptism, to be baptised, signifying his willingness to change and follow God’s way, recognizing that he is with us, like all of us and maybe even not perfect. God affirms this act with an acknowledgement that Jesus is God’s son, and pleased with him. The listeners are told to listen to him. Jesus then goes into the wilderness to pray and discern the path his ministry will take. This is the beginning of Jesus’ example of the importance of prayer and discernment in the life of faith. How much time do you take for prayer? For silent reflection, meditation, or prayer? I know I am not good at making time for the silent quiet time that I need. It is something I need to improve upon as part of living out my faith.

John’s message may seem difficult and harsh and it is. It is preparing us for the coming of Jesus, who also often provided a difficult message. One might ask where is the good news? I think the good news is for the people who are suffering under the Roman occupation. Think of what it would mean for them to see tax collectors and Roman soldiers coming to be baptized, committing to changing their ways and repent! It would be a picture of hope and wonder and definitely good news! There is also good news in the message of Jesus’ coming to judge between those who are bearing fruit and those who are not. The statement about Jesus separating the wheat from the chaff may be seen as judging the good people from the bad, but in actuality, it recognizes that we all have good and bad in us, and is about separating the good that is within each person from the bad, and drawing out the good. This is the good news as well. It is an important insight to remember when thinking about and dealing with people who we think are bad or wrong. It is important to see the good in them, recognizing that there is good in them. That is the challenge and blessing of John and Jesus’ message. John saw the good in the tax collectors and Roman soldiers, and appealed to that goodness to inspire them to change.

May we be so inspired – to review our life, as we often do at the turn of a new year, and discern how we can live more faithfully. What can we do? What action can we take? What time do we need to make for ourselves? May John’s challenging message, challenge us to turn around and live out our radical revolutionary baptismal promises, following God’s call to creating a more generous and just community, the Kingdom of God.