

North Kildonan United Church

9th January 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Psalm 29

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Have you ever picked up a book, opened it up at a random page, and started to read? Perhaps you are in a book store and you've spotted the latest novel by Alexander McCall Smith or Robert Harris. You are familiar with these authors and curious about their new publications. You recognize the name of a character or two from a previous book, but otherwise you're at a bit of a loss about what this new book is all about.

So you read a page or two, maybe three, gradually realizing that the store owner is watching you, and you start wondering if that person is going to come over and remind you that you are in a bookstore and not in a library. To avoid embarrassment, you put the book back on the shelf or perhaps you feel there is enough in that book to cause you to buy it.

Sometimes the lectionary readings on Sundays have that kind of feel, that sense of opening up the Bible at a random page and trying to guess at what's going on. You recognize a few familiar words-if you are in the gospels then Jesus is not an unfamiliar name-though some passages can leave you scratching your head.

Today's reading from Luke has that feel, to some degree. It begins this way: "*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying...*"

Why, you may be wondering, were the people filled with expectation?

The rest of the text doesn't really tell us, so let's see what led up to their expectation.

Chapter 3 of Luke's gospel begins with the coming of John the Baptist, and we would have heard some of that chapter during Advent. It reads, in part:

John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

*and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”’*

John’s message takes form, and in language not at all politically correct he says to the crowds: *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”’*

Not sure how happy the crowd was to be called a brood of vipers.

It’s important to note that the crowd were a dedicated bunch. They were standing with John by the river because they were seeking to be baptised, seeking to renew their relationship with God. John is pretty clear as to what baptism is all about.

To be baptized by John is to embark on a new way of living, a fresh start in a life based on fairness and justice. This new life begins by repenting, by turning away from all those things, those attitudes, those practices that separate us from God and cause divisions with others.

John is trying to prepare people for Jesus, but those in the crowd wondered if John might be the promised Messiah.

So the people ask John what they should do.

In the words of Tom Wright’s translation, they, and we, are told.

“Anyone who has two cloaks’, replied John, ‘should give one to someone who hasn’t got one. The same applies to anyone who has plenty of food.’

Some toll-collectors came to be baptized. ‘Teacher’, they said, ‘what should we do?’

‘Don’t collect more than what is laid down,’ he replied.

Some soldiers, too, asked John, ‘What about us? What should we do?’

‘No extortion,’ replied John, ‘and no blackmail. Be content with your wages.’

Today’s lesson begins at this point. The people were excited because of the honest and hopeful teachings they heard. He must be the one we have been waiting for, they say to themselves. This is a Messiah I can follow, some might have said.

But no, John is not the Messiah. John is a prophet, John is the greatest of the prophets, but Jesus, the One whom the people need as their Messiah, is about to be baptized by John, and the mission and ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ begins in Luke’s gospel.

Immediately after his baptism Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he is tempted by the devil. In one of the most understated sentences in scripture we hear this: *“He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished.”* I should think so! During Lent we will hear Luke’s account of those forty days of temptation.

Within a chapter or so people quit their jobs to follow him, people bring the sick from all over the country to be healed by him, and crowds gather to listen to his message. In a short period of time he's got the religious authorities up in arms accusing him of blasphemy, and then plotting to kill him, and within three years of his baptism there's a conspiracy to have him tried on false charges and he's tortured and executed. All quite a dramatic impact for gentle carpenter from Nazareth.

So what happened to Jesus at his baptism? Luke tells us that when Jesus had been baptized, heaven was opened to him and he saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

Others baptized by John may have experienced the forgiveness of sins at this moment, but what Jesus experienced was the gift of the Holy Spirit of God. He saw the Spirit of God descending and alighting on him. This is the same Spirit of God found in the first sentence of Genesis, brooding over the formless earth, like a mother bird over her egg, cherishing it and willing it to life. This is the Spirit who broods over each one of us, cherishing us and willing us to fullness of life. This is the Spirit who is the active creative power of God in the world, who calls and guides and loves us into the paths of God, who calls us to live life and to create life and to redeem life and to enhance life and to protect life.

The fruits of Jesus' experience of the Spirit can be seen in the stories of the gospel. He was a changed man from this moment on, a man on a mission, a man determined to bring the message of an intimate, merciful, healing, liberating God to people in need, even if it cost him his life.

But the mission of Jesus was launched first by his cousin John the Baptist. John, in his preaching and teaching, in his call for repentance and ethical living and seeking justice, John prepared the way for Jesus.

And then, as John raised Jesus from the baptismal water of the River Jordan and the words of acceptance thundered from heaven, Jesus was ready to begin his ministry.

And until next Advent, the gospel of Luke will be our companion and guide to assist us to follow Jesus. Let the adventure begin.

A Prayer

O Christ, you humbled yourself and received baptism at the hands of your friend and cousin, John, showing us the way of humility; help us to follow you, and never to be encumbered with pride.

O Christ, by your baptism, you took our humanity into the cleansing waters; give us new birth, and lead us into life as sons and daughters of God.

O Christ, by your baptism the material world became charged with your holiness; make us instruments of your transformation in this our world.

O Christ, by your baptism you revealed the Trinity, your Father calling you his beloved Son, and the Spirit descending upon you like a dove; renew our worship, rededicate us in the spirit of our baptism, and mould us into our true nature, in the image of God.

For your love's sake. Amen.