

Starting our freedom journey with repentance

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Texts: Luke 1:67-80

Luke 3:1-9

Introduction

This pulpit hasn't really changed at all since last I stood behind it. But you the congregation have changed – quite dramatically in fact. It is so good to see so many new faces here – such a sign of life and health in the congregation, under such good new leadership. (Unfortunately, what has also changed as I age is my ability to remember names). Lydia and I do feel very blessed, and very nourished, as we have re-entered TUMC.

Our Advent theme is “Freedom Bound”. Our texts for today suggest that our freedom journey begins with repentance. And then we have our four very striking banners. A few minutes ago we turned around our second banner. We turned chaos into peace.

Did you now that the word repentance, in Greek, literally means turning around. Like in turning around our banners.

From chaos to peace. Chaos in big letters. And then peace in big letters.

Chaos. 60 million refugees in our world live in unimaginable chaos. Hopefully some of them will find some peace as we Canadians welcome them. The Valleyview Mennonite Church, where our son and daughter-in-law are co-pastors, are welcoming a Syrian refugee family to Canada this week-end – a mom and dad and a 7 year old and a 3 year old. A three year journey to freedom and peace for that family. But this will be an especially challenging sponsorship. The 3 year old has cancer. London was chosen for its medical specialties. The church has arranged immediate care for the 3 year old and for the family.

Lydia and I were thrilled that TUMC has decided to sponsor refugees. I understand that an Iranian family has been entrusted to our care.

This afternoon the Pax Christi Choral, the “peace of Christ” choir in which I sing, will perform a magnificent refugee story – “The Infant Christ” by Hector Berlioz. It tells the story of Jesus as refugee. It begins with King Herod desperately trying to kill Jesus, and doing so by killing all male babies two years and under in Bethlehem. Shades of the thousands of children killed in Syria and Iraq and many other places in our world. Shades of our world’s fear of refugees. At first Joseph and Mary and Jesus are not welcomed in Egypt. Their lives are in chaos. Many voices give vent to their anti-refugee rage. But the Ishmalites, perhaps forerunners of Muslims, finally welcome them. Perhaps, finally, some peace for Joseph and Mary and Jesus.

Today is also the anniversary of the Montreal massacre – the shooting of those 14 women. Today is thus a national day of remembrance of that violence against women.

Or we think of the victims of human trafficking. It must be unimaginable chaos to lose control of your own body, your own free will, your own integrity as a person. Perhaps we can offer at least a bit of peace and healing in our project next door.

But we probably also have to confess to some chaos in our own lives, don’t we – some unsettled-ness, some confusion, some anxiety around life, and choices made, and relationships, and life plans? Retirement for me has been mostly very good, but there are moments of unsettledness when it is not clear at all what the bigger purposes of life are at this stage beyond having more time for golf and hockey and jigsaw puzzles. Where do we turn around the chaos banner in our own lives to boldly announce peace?

Back to Jesus the refugee. The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew word “Yashech”, which among several meanings, means, “to set free”. Jesus is the one who sets free. It would take many sermons to explore what it means to be set free. Our Advent theme proclaims that we are “freedom Bound”, freedom bound because we are on the Jesus way. We are on the way to being set free from that which still holds us back, which still holds us captive to lesser values and lesser gods and lesser possibilities. We are being

set free from the chaos that wants to engulf our world and perhaps even our own lives. Our journey with Jesus is a journey toward and into freedom and peace. Only death will complete that journey.

John the Baptist proclaims that the freedom journey begins with repentance. Let's enter his story.

His parents were really too old to have a baby. And when the angel (what is it about angels anyway) – when the angel told old Zechariah there in the holiest of holies in the temple that his wife Elizabeth would bear a child he snorted in disbelief. And, since he couldn't believe the message, he lost his power of speech. Couldn't say a word. Totally mute. But then the miracle did happen, and way past child-bearing age, Elizabeth did become pregnant, and the old couple was ecstatic. But no shouts of joy at all from Zechariah. He still couldn't utter a sound. Not even a peep of joy will come out of his mouth, no matter how exuberant his dancing.

When their son was born everyone in the village starts celebrating – celebrating the miracle of it all, celebrating the miracle of Elizabeth in her old age having a child, and celebrating the beautiful baby the parents brought to the synagogue on the eighth day to circumcise him and to name him and to bless him (sort of like we do at a parent-child-dedication ceremony. No, we don't do the naming bit, or the circumcision bit, but surely we do the blessing bit). And then there is that great moment – the naming of the baby. The name? No mystery here. That is already determined, isn't it? Of course he will be named Zechariah, after his daddy. That is the only proper thing to do.

But the mother says (the mother says because the father can't, he is still mute), the mother says "hold it, we have decided on the name John. Our babies name is John". And now everyone else is dumbfounded (pardon the pun). They are aghast. "But what is wrong with the name Zachariah", they start shouting. There isn't a John to be found in the whole family tree. Better check with the father to make sure this isn't some terrible mistake. So father Zechariah, still voiceless, takes a writing tablet and writes the name of his son. His name is John. And suddenly Zechariah regains his speech, and bursts out with a long poetic vision speech about what this son will one day

become. And there is already in that speech a hint of what his son, as a thirty year old, will be doing and saying.

“And you, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us...(Luke 1:76-78).

This is the Advent part of the story. And if we would pursue this advent story further we would see how intimately it is already connected with the birth of Jesus only a few months later. But our next lectionary reading for today jumps 30 years, so we will too, and we will land on the story of John as a 30 year old.

Luke 3:1-9

Ah, the baby Johnny grew up – and who could have known what the adult version would look like. The cute baby became – well – became a desert hermit breathing thunder and telling people off, calling people a brood of vipers. His most over-used word was “repent”. And this all unfolds in a time of almost total chaos politically.

Mark describes John this way. “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.” (Mark 1:6). I kind of picture him with waist long tangled hair, a long, unkempt beard, fiery eyes, and a total inability to make small talk. Luke tells us that this John the Baptist, as he is by then called, “went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

How jarring. How rude. People are going about their ordinary lives, coping as best they can, trying to live decently under the insufferable Roman occupation, going to the synagogue occasionally, even sometimes giving alms to the poor, and saying their morning prayers, and raising their children as best they can, and not fighting with their neighbors too much, and they hear about this prophetic character out in the wilderness and go check him out – and get a broadside right between the eyes.

“You brood of vipers” John yells at them. “Repent of your sins. Be baptized as a sign that you have repented and found forgiveness.”

“But John, haven’t you got it all wrong. Our big problem is not ourselves – it’s the Romans. We are under the thumb of Rome. Can’t breathe any freedom air at all. Total chaos here. We need a Messiah who will help us drive out the Romans army. And you tell us to look inside ourselves and repent? You are way off track John. And then – and then - you tell us yet to look to Jesus – a Jesus who doesn’t lift a finger against the Romans, much less raise an army to drive them out.”

Ah yes, this John the hermit looks into the hearts of ordinary people and sees the emptiness and disillusionment and despair there, and surely not all of that has to do with their brutal Roman masters. Now to be fair, John does also confront King Herod, the Jewish puppet King of Rome. Something about rebuking Herod for his adultery with Herodias, his half-brother Philip’s wife. And when Herodias’s daughter Solome danced so provocatively before Herod, and then asked for John’s head on a platter as a reward, John did lose his head – very literally.

But that was a bit later. Now he is preaching repentance. Repentance, from the Greek word “Metanoia”. Repentance literally means to change direction, to turn around. You are going in one direction and you need to turn around and go in another direction. You need to turn yourself around until you face toward God, your true home. Let go of your helplessness and your hopelessness and your cynicism and your despair and your blaming everything and everyone but yourself for your emptiness. Let go of your anger and indifference and self-centered-ness and broken relationships and the worship of idols too small.

And when the crowds ask John, “What then shall we do”, John becomes very, very practical – at least according to Luke. “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise”. And when some tax collectors asked him what they should do he said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you”. Don’t cheat. And to the soldiers he said, “Do not exhort money from anyone by threats or false accusation. And be satisfied with your wages”. (Luke 3:10-14).

But it is the religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees that get the brunt of his wrath. They too come to John to be baptized by him, but John is not impressed with their motives. “You brood of vipers”, he yells at them. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come”? He accuses them of trusting in their ancestry for their salvation. Being children of Abraham is not enough, he shouts. “Baptism is based on repentance, not lineage”, he preaches.

But then John quickly moves the focus away from himself to Jesus. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is more powerful than I, is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Jesus will baptize you with Holy Spirit and with fire? In one sense this did happen at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit did descend on those 3000 people gathered to hear Peter preach. Luke, in Acts 2, says it was like tongues of flame descending on the people.

But I suspect that John had more “judgement” on his mind – end times kind of judgment -Unquenchable fire kind of judgement. “His winnowing fork is in his hand”, John says of Jesus, “and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”

And maybe, maybe, John didn’t quite get this right after all. Listen as the story continues.

Later, when John was languishing in prison for confronting Herod for his adultery, he finally sent two of his disciples to Jesus with a question. “Are you really the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? Strange question, isn’t it? It’s a question based on doubt. Why now the doubt? He is in prison. And he doesn’t see the judgement he had proclaimed. He doesn’t see the fire destroying the wicked. And so he starts doubting his own message, or at least doubting whether Jesus is the one who will fulfill his message.

Jesus responds so simply, so compassionately. Luke recounts that Jesus had just cured many people of diseases, plagues and evil spirits, and had

given sight to many who were blind. Now Jesus answers John.” Go and tell my friend John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them...” (Luke 7:18-23).

You can almost hear the subtext. “John, my friend, I am not first of all about the kind of judgment you proclaimed. I am about good news, about healing, about new life, about peace. You have prepared well for my ministry. Repentance is the key. But don’t get stuck on the fire of judgement stuff. Yes, there is judgement. But Judgement is mostly what happens inside when people acknowledge the chaos inside and discover there is a new way, a love inspired way. Repentance is turning around, turning towards God and God’s love and God’s compassion and God’s forgiveness and God’s healing and God’s freedom.” Repentance is leaving chaos behind and embracing peace.

Conclusion

Our text doesn’t say how John heard these words of Jesus, how he responded, how he prepared himself for his date with the executioner. Did he find the inner peace he needed?

Can we find the inner peace we need to face life as we experience it? Maybe, just maybe, to find peace we need to embrace John’s message of repentance. Repentance as in turning – turning away from a culture that celebrates materialism and consumerism, and celebrates instant gratification and impersonal communication. And maybe we need to repent from believing that only greater violence and more air strikes will end terrorism in our world. Does violence ever get at the roots of the deep issues that breed terrorism?

I do want to keep turning away from the gods of despair and cynicism and judgement and chaos. I do want to keep turning more fully toward the God of life, of hope, of forgiveness, of peace, of healed relationships, of new life. I do embrace a life of repentance.

And surely John is right in pointing immediately to Jesus as the fulfilment of all that God wants to do in our world and in our lives. I do want to do that in my life. I want to keep on turning toward Jesus. And that is what I invite you all to do. Only then will I, and will you all, be truly freedom bound.

Amen