

(Re)Turning to the One Who Affirms Our Belovedness

-Have you ever been confronted and grateful? Have you ever been faced with the truth in a way that caught you up short and forced you to admit to yourself that you were veering off track? But found yourself strangely *glad* to finally admit how broken or empty you were so that you might find a fresh new beginning and healthy direction? Have you ever felt thankful someone believed in you enough to offer words of tough love in order to affirm the deeper *goodness* of who you are?

This is the kind of renewing message that's at the heart of the prophet and passage we're reading today. I'll read Luke 3.1-22 in two sections:

-From Luke 3.1-18:

**3** In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, ...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
...<sup>6</sup>and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

<sup>7</sup>John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Even now the ax 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.”

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>18</sup>So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

## The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

-I am completely intrigued by this scene. Here stands John the Baptizer at the Jordan River in the forlorn desert near the Dead Sea. And the people flock to him there. Not to the religious center of Jerusalem. Not to make some systematized sacrifice at the Temple. No. They're drawn to a wild-eyed prophet by a muddy river in the desert. And to the toughness of his truth.

They're drawn by the one calling for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance means 'turning.' They're in need of turning to *God*. Of an authentic turning/life-change that discovers renewal in God's mercy.

And John confronts them. He calls them snakes. 'Shed your pretense like deadskin and get naked before God.' 'You can't count yourselves God's people simply because you were born in the Land,' he tells them. 'No. Our people crossed the Jordan to belong wholly to God. No more nominal faith. No more pretending without *turning*. Turn to God. Sink your body in the water. Cross the Jordan in your *heart*. Live changed lives for the Lord. And be made new in God's mercy.'

An inviting recruitment speech, no?

But the people come. Urgently. Gladly. Why? We can only assume John's indictment is on target. That they are sick of selfish and shallow living. That they long to be led to what is soul-deep and profound with hope.

-Eugene Peterson says that John here confronts us with the core of what we all of us need: 'John the Baptist,' he writes, 'cuts through the vast clutter of what we want and think we need and puts his finger on exactly what's essential....' Peterson says we are surrounded by pressures to consume and produce and acquire. We're sold half-baked self-help programs for pursuing happiness. But 'John,' Peterson writes, 'preaches a change of *direction*,' because 'what is essentially wrong with us is that [we turn] our backs on God.' (unquote) What counts is not the pursuit of happiness. Not our pleasure, power, popularity or posturing, but lives turned to God. Lives of goodness, truth and love, fueled from the blazing center of God's mercy.

-John says so. And so the people ask: 'So what should we do?' Do you remember how he responds? What rules of thumb he announces for the authentically faithful life? They're not ethically complex; but they *are* radically recentering.

To the Crowd, he says: No hoarding necessities. Share what you have. Your coats. Your food. / To the Tax collectors, he says: Don't cheat people. Be fair. Collect what's legal. / To the Soldiers, he says: No bullying. No blackmail. No abuse of power to take what you can. Be content with what you have.

Turning toward God means treating persons across God's earth like God made them. Not like objects that can be neglected or abused. Those coming to be baptized are committing to belong to God's vision, to be the light of the world, to live as the people in whom and through whom God's justice would shine.

-NT Wright tells of a cartoon he saw that pictures a skeptic shouting up to the clouds:

‘God! If you’re up there, tell us what to do!’  
Back comes a voice: ‘Feed the hungry, house the homeless, establish justice.’  
The sceptic looks alarmed. ‘Just testing,’ he says.  
‘Me, too,’ replies the voice.

-A new year may be a good time for us to be confronted by a wild-eyed, deep-souled prophet. To be exhorted to authenticity of faith. It may be a good time for turning toward God. For renewal of heart. For the simplicity of sharing what we have. For the integrity of refusing to cheat, neglect or abuse. It may be time for stepping into the Jordan. For a baptism of life-change that buoys vitality in God’s mercy.

Friends, are you intrigued that people come streaming to the river of tough love and hard truths? Are you grateful someone cares enough to confront us with God’s demand that we live like persons with souls? Are you drawn to the renewal John signals?

John’s preaching points upward. ‘I baptize you with water,’ he says. ‘The One who comes will baptize you with God’s Spirit.’

The renewing power we’re looking for? The power to turn to God? The restorative power to live lives of joyous, just integrity? It comes from locating our lives in the affirmation of the Spirit coming from the Father and the Son.

Here is the event John’s life and preaching pointed to, from Luke 3.21-22:

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus *also* had been baptized and was praying, the *heaven* was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy *Spirit* descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a *voice* came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Do you hear this deeply relational word of affirmation? Before Jesus can do anything to merit approval, the Father pours out his affection on the Son. The Spirit of his grace. His heart and pleasure: You are mine, my Beloved.

This, friends, is the beginning point. Ground zero for Jesus’ identity and ours. A corrective to a world of identity theft, that would have us value ourselves according to our production, our consumption, and our acquisition. Our power, our pleasures, and our popularity. Here is God’s Spirit of love calling Jesus, calling you and me, beloved. Here is the forgiving power of our baptism for life-change.

What did you get for your star word? I heard some great stories about them this week. (And you will have a chance to receive one today if you missed out last week.) Mine was ‘affirmation.’ Which set me to thinking that the affirmation of my star - and in truth the affirmation behind all of yours - is that I am, you are, Beloved of God. That this is our primary identity.

Which means we can turn to God. Again and again.

Pastor Eric Peterson suggests that our baptism affords us enormous freedom – the freedom of grace - to grow and learn and change. That it seals upon us our primary identity. And that it teaches us a two-step dance lesson of turning to God – always turning again and again to the One who calls us Beloved - so that we might then take a step of faith. Then, of course, fail and change and grow and turn again to take another step. A dance of happy repentance and growth.

I heard someone say this week that John’s invitation, that Jesus’ invitation at the Jordan, is to live wet. Never to dry off and forget who we are. We are the baptized. Immersed not just once but always wet with the waters of our life-changing Belovedness.

Friends, are you longing to be renewed? To return to God? What if a baptism of live-change means locating our lives in the affirmation of God’s unmerited love?

How will you return to the waters? How will you choose to live wet? How will you lodge your life in the glad reality of a baptism that sets you free to dance?//

- I invite you to close your eyes and hear this word of blessing that I heard Pastor Eric Peterson (from Colbert Presbyterian in Washington on a podcast called Low in the Water) offer this week. I would invite you then to simply sit for a few minutes in its biblical affirmation of great love:

You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and grafted into Christ forever. There is nothing in heaven or on earth or in hell itself that can separate you from the love that God has for you. You have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. You are his pride and joy. Your baptism is your passport- identifying you as a forever citizen in the kingdom of heaven. Lodge your life in that glad reality and be at peace. Amen.