

Luke 3: 7-18  
December 12, 2021

**Close to Home: A Home for All**  
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

The only detention I ever received in school was for something I did not do. Our entire seventh grade English class received 3 detentions for acting inappropriately while our teacher was out and we had a substitute teacher. With an expression blended with fury and disappointment, Mrs. Cizon decreed ALL would serve detention for our insurrection. The classroom stunned, my stomach lurched. I frantically pondered, what had I done? I didn't remember acting up in class. But from the stern expression on her face, arguing would be futile. Reluctantly, I served my detentions, quietly on mornings before school.

Today's reading from the gospel of Luke might feel like we are receiving detention for something we didn't do. John the Baptizer clearly failed his pastoral class at seminary. He greets the crowd with harsh words—"You brood of vipers!"--and suddenly, this Sunday of Joy turns into a Sunday of Confusion, and even Offense. No one here would claim to be a perfect Disciple of Jesus, but we are all trying our best. We volunteer, we pray for each other, we give our time and talent. And yet John is calling us to serve detention, regardless of if we think we deserve it. We might have a tightness in our stomachs, too, harkening back to stern teachers or parents.

Last week was a communal celebration of the arrival of the other special baby of Advent, this same John. And I have to wonder, too, what Zechariah and Elizabeth think of their prophet son, in his camel-hair shirts and raw food diet. Is this the kind of prophet they intended to raise? "You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins," Zechariah sang. And herein lies our hope, peace, and joy: John's harsh words condemn our sinful behaviors and, but John also tells us how to be saved.

Forgiveness is the foundation of our salvation. And when we repent, we build a home for all.

By preparing the way for Jesus, John tells us what kind of kingdom to prepare for. When we pause and listen to the prophet's voice, instead of taking a position of defense or argumentation, he brings "a message of good news—of change, forgiveness, and justice—to a suffering people. God called John for a specific place and time (v. 1-4), and his cry from the wilderness, as written in Isaiah, proclaimed leveled valleys and righted wrongs. This was, and is, a message of joy, especially for those who had lost hope, hurt by the inequities and injustices perpetrated by the empire and the religious authorities aligned with it. The world as they knew it was about to change. Crowds came to John to be baptized, and he charged them

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with “bearing fruit worthy of repentance” (v. 8), not relying on past glories, heritage, or lineage, but producing their own fruit, living and acting in ways that demonstrated true change.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course, repentance is more than just facing ourselves and saying, “I am sorry.” That’s a start. But producing fruit in keeping with repentance, as John compels us to do, means making amends. With the Holy Spirit’s help it means refusing to continue down destructive, death-filled, and toxic paths. It means choosing life in all its vulnerability, fragility, and glory—life in Christ. Such a life is a full life (John 10:10). Repentance in all its forms brings us life, healing, shalom. When we confess our sins to one another and pray for one another, we will be healed (James 5:16).

Audrey West points out, “In response to the peoples’ question, John speaks directly to temptations inherent to each group—particularly that of grasping after “more” at the expense of others (a temptation that is familiar enough today). He admonishes the crowds to share resources. As for the tax-collectors, don’t be greedy. Soldiers, don’t abuse power...repentance is lived out in the everyday practices of life, no matter one’s vocational calling.

Repentance is a foundational stone in building God’s peaceable kingdom. When we build a Home for all, we will find joy. In his hymn, “All Are Welcome,” Marty Haugen invites us to imagine what a church that is a home for all would look like.

Let us build a house  
where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ  
shall end divisions.  
All are welcome, all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place.

The church is not only a physical building—the house we build is the ethos of our community. We learned last week about how the foundation of our faith is peace, justice, and love, and that

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<sup>1</sup> From Sermon Guide for Close to Home, by A Sanctified Art.

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the arrival of Jesus shakes the foundations. Prophets call us to examine our own behaviors, and self-assess how we have fallen short of God's intentions for us and our community. If we think that God is only interested in handing out detention slips, we miss the point. Building a house where love can dwell and all can safely live—whether that house is a neighborhood, a city, or even a church, is the fruit of repentance, and a household in the kingdom of God. Amen.