



Let's begin Again

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

December 12, 2021, Luke 3:7-18

I'm curious, did you like the translation of Luke's gospel that Rex just read? It's called *The Message* which is a paraphrase, not a direct word for word translation. Let's start with a little exercise. Do me a favor and read the Gospel reading in the bulletin which is the more traditional translation.¹ Then read the *Message* translation on the screen.² For those of you online, you can look up Luke 3:7-18 in a Bible, or you can click on the link to the bulletin just under the service video in the email or on the website, wherever you got it.

We're going to do something totally unorthodox right now. I wonder if I could get two or three people to actually answer this question out loud --- did you see anything differently or more deeply in the *Message* version of this reading? Just a few people, shout it out.

This process, of seeing the scripture in a new way like what the *Message* Bible helps us do, is exactly what our church's namesake John the Baptist was doing. John's entire purpose was what scripture called "preparing the Way of the Lord." He was getting the people ready for the one who was to come, Jesus the Messiah. And today, we are in Advent, doing the same thing.

¹ <https://stjohns-mpls.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/9.00-12.12.21wInsert.pdf>

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/msg/luke/passage/?q=luke+3:7-18>

Advent is the four weeks before Christmas when we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ—both the birth of the historical Jesus 2000 years ago, and also the coming of Christ to us and in us today. So we call Advent the church’s new year, because it’s always about seeing something very ancient as if for the very first time, and being transformed by it. Today we also get to baptize a beautiful little girl, Vivian NaPier, experiencing an ancient tradition in a brand new life, initiating Vivian into Jesus’ Way of Love.

Now it’s true that John’s words in today’s gospel reading, whether in the traditional or contemporary version, can be a little jarring. It’s hard to imagine how people kept coming to John when he called them snakes and warned them about unquenchable fire. But the text is very clear that the people did keep coming to John – he was saying something powerful that meant something. He was passionate because he had recognized the living God, active and moving, in the ancient tradition he had inherited. He wanted people to be shaken up, to stop doing tradition for the sake of tradition and instead to realize that they were sitting on a goldmine. It was right there in front of them. It is right here in front of us, too.

And Jesus, who followed John the Baptist, did exactly the same thing. Just the next chapter in Luke’s gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry by claiming his own mission from the prophet Isaiah, which was “to bring good news to the poor, liberation to the captives, sight to the blind, release for the oppressed, to proclaim that this is the year for God to act.” He was bringing the words of the ancient prophet alive.

Later, the Apostle Paul took this new movement—it wasn’t even called “Christian” yet, it was just called the “Way” of Jesus—and spread it all over the globe. Paul was doing the same thing John and Jesus had done—looking with absolutely fresh eyes at an ancient tradition and recognizing the living heartbeat of God within it. This way was meant to change peoples’ everyday

lives because it was that powerful, that meaningful, and that real. In last week's adult forum, John Bellamey and Lynnell Mickelsen taught about the Apostle Paul. Despite some of the difficult teachings that are attributed to him in the New Testament, the fact was that he was an utter innovator, bringing alive an ancient tradition.

This time of year is not just about getting the Christmas tree up and buying the presents, though doing those things is really fun. It's about preparing to be woken up, even sometimes shocked awake, by how utterly real and utterly transforming the Way of Jesus is. It's doing what the Message Bible does, what John and Jesus and Paul did. It's seeing Christ as if for the first time, and recognizing, in a way that might even give you goosebumps, that this good news is for us. For today.

The good news is something that we must interpret for ourselves in today's world. At its center is the reality that in Christ, God was and is taking human form, to be close to us and to heal the world. I've heard it said that Christ comes to us because God will not be God without us. The divine and the human are meant to merge. When this happens, instead of being curved in on ourselves, we can be flipped outward in lives of radical compassion and generosity, humility and freedom and joy. John's message to the people was to share coats and food. To not use power or privilege to take advantage of people, to benefit ourselves at others' expense. Jesus' message was that God's purpose is for liberation and healing. This implies liberation and healing from all that binds us, whether that be old childhood hurts, or defects of character, or addiction, or systemic racism, or the exploitation of the earth that is causing such great harm.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has been speaking over and over about becoming a church that "looks and acts like Jesus." This is what he says:

We are becoming a new and re-formed church, the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement... whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his love,

No longer centered on empire and establishment,

No longer fixated on preserving institutions,

No longer shoring up white supremacy or anything else that hurts or harms any child of God.

Bishop Curry says we'll know we're making progress when we are centered on the vision and values and person of Jesus; when we live lives of radical generosity and compassion; when we unite around the practice of a rhythm of life in small communities; and when we reclaim the original Christian identity as a Spirit-driven countercultural movement.³

We have all been through so much in the last two years. This extended pandemic has caused changes and disruption and harm far beyond what we ever imagined. The country's political divide, and the threat of climate change, have kept many of us awake at night. Churches all over the country are shrinking as the nation becomes more pluralistic and less trusting of organized religion in general. And I know each one of you comes with your own story of how life is for you right now, at home, in your health and work and relationships. But in exactly this time of upheaval and change, we are given a great gift. Among the countless lifestyles and possibilities of today's world, here we are, gathered around an ancient tradition that is so new the ink isn't even dry on the page. It is the Way of Love.

It's kind of a miracle. We are a group of people who actually gathers every week in order to do more than talk about love, but to live it, in our own imperfect ways. We are learning about the Bible and Empire. We are learning

³ See www.episcopalchurch.org/wearebecoming

spiritual practices, and fresh ways to explore scripture, and how following the Way of Jesus asks us to prioritize dismantling racism and caring for our earth. Just yesterday our Racial Justice & Healing Steering Committee and staff met to discuss the racial equity audit we just completed about St. John's. On Thursday St. John's members gathered with our sister churches St. Luke's- St. James and St Paul's to discuss the possibility of co-sponsoring a family of Afghani refugees fleeing the extreme violence of the Taliban. We are pouring out our resources for the school in Haiti, St Philippe – St Jacques, whom Dianne Pizey and the Haiti committee have loved for years and with whom we have a relationship. We are reading, exploring, transforming all the time. We are learning, bit by bit, to look and act like Jesus.

And our own church is in transition. We don't know exactly what the future will bring. We don't know how the institution of church will need to adapt. But we do know that our central purpose has never changed, even though we need to interpret it with fresh eyes every generation. Let this day, this beautiful day Vivian NaPier is baptized and the rest of us remember our baptismal covenants, be the day we begin again.

Let there be no more experts and passive listeners. Let's all be co-creators of the Way of Love Jesus is bringing about among us. Let's explode with innovation and freshness and vitality and generosity. This might mean that we share more with each other about where we are stuck and where we are struggling. It might mean we open our hearts and our lives to a new Afghani family or a Latino family from our sister church St. Nicholas in Richfield. It might mean cultivating new partnerships in North Minneapolis and in Linden Hills. It might mean committing to daily quiet with God in order to be nourished, every day, in love and renewed intention. We can learn, explore and decide together. Let's not be afraid of the future, but walk humbly into it with joy and hope and life. Let every day be a new day. Let's begin again.