

“A Prophet, a President and the Sin of Greed”

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First United Methodist Church

Baraboo, Wisconsin

Luke 3:1-22

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler^[a] of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler^[b] of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler^[c] of Abilene, **2** during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. **3** He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, **4** 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.

5 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;

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

7 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? **8** 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. **9** 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.” **10** And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” **11** In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” **12** Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” **13** He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” **14** 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.” **15** As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,^[d] **16** 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^[e] the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” **18** So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. **19** But Herod the ruler,^[f] who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, **20** added to them all by

shutting up John in prison. ²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² 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;^[g] with you I am well pleased."^[h]

Boston politician Tip O'Neill said, "all politics is local." By that he meant it's fixing the potholes on the street driven over daily by your constituents that matters. It's the human, mundane, day-to-day aspect – the personal handshake – that really drives the wheels of government. It's the ground game that matters. I begin on the ground in Baraboo today. On my route between the parsonage on the top of the hill and the church in downtown Baraboo, there is a house with a "Don't Tread on Me" flag. Have you seen the flags with yellow background with a snake? According to Wikipedia, The Gadsen flag dates back to the American Revolution. In 2009, The American Tea Party started using it. It's meaning today is ambiguous. And it has been associated with far right groups and used as a symbol of "American patriotism, individual liberties and disagreement with government intervention." Flags with that message "Don't Tread on Me" were flown by the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6th. The extraordinary events in Washington politics this week are local too.

Despite his failure to get the courts to reverse the election results declaring Joe Biden the president elect, Donald Trump, the president of the United States, spoke for seventy minutes last Wednesday to an angry crowd who, like him, refused to accept the will of the voters. Trump incited them to violence. The crowd carried out the will of their leader, storming the U.S. Capitol, disrupting the proceedings of the Electoral College count. The result was death, destruction in the statuary hall, hand guns drawn in the senate chambers, and much more. We are living through the aftermath of what happened that day.

I'm no politician. I'm a pastor, called to preach and teach the Word of God. Today I'll share what I hear today's scripture saying to us in Baraboo in this extraordinary week. I'll try to keep my preaching local, knowing that I'm speaking to Democrats and Republicans and independents and non-voters. Anyone who has heard me preach more than a few times knows that political and social issues matter to me. LGBTQ inclusiveness, climate change, and dismantling racism are some issues close to my heart. But I have always tried to speak to these issues in a nonpartisan way, doing what I was taught in seminary: talk about moral issues, ethical issues in society as they relate to the scripture and our faith. So far, I have never condemned Donald Trump as a person. I spoke out against his tacit support of white supremacist groups, and called out his tendency to lie repeatedly, but I never strongly or forcefully spoke about the threat he was to democracy and this country. Today I regret that. I believe that was wrong. "Too little, too late," you may be thinking. But better late than never. Because of that "Don't Tread on Me Flag," I know I have a neighbor who most likely sympathizes with those people who were in that rally on January 6th. Like the President, they are wrong. These people have heard conspiracy theories repeated so often it sounds

like truth; but it isn't. And truth matters. Which brings me to John the Baptist and our scripture today.

All four gospels in some way place the story of the start of Jesus' ministry next to the story of John the Baptist. John the Baptist never used the words Electoral College. And Jesus never spoke of democracy. Neither John nor Jesus knew anything about the United States constitution or peaceful transition of power. But John the Baptist knew about tyranny. He knew about abuse of power and he knew about human greed. John the Baptist knew about speaking truth to power. Today's scripture is a political one. Luke begins chapter three of his gospel by listing the rulers who were in power when John's ministry was going on. We have no independent historical record of the existence of just one of those rulers listed: Lysanias. The rest we do. John the Baptist spoke truth to power and paid the ultimate price. We have to go to Mark chapter 6 to find the most detailed account of how John died. (Luke only hints at this story by saying John ended up in prison). John challenged King Herod's marriage to Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. She ends up getting John the Baptist put to death, executed as part of a terrible royal party game.

But In today's scripture, John is very much alive. He's in the wilderness, at the Jordan River, far from the centers of political and religious power in Jerusalem. Crowds are coming to hear his fiery apocalyptic preaching. "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Vipers are snakes. A brood of vipers is a bunch of baby snakes that usually hide under rocks to stay safe. But if their safety is disturbed, they flee wildly in all directions. In Matthew's telling of this story, John's point is explicit: the brood of vipers are the Sadducees and Pharisees; the powerful in the religious establishment in Jerusalem. These religious leaders have found a way to appease Rome, in order to stay in power while maintaining the institution of the temple and placing impossible burdens on the poor with costly religious sacrifices. John is calling these religious leaders snakes who flee in all directions when threatened.

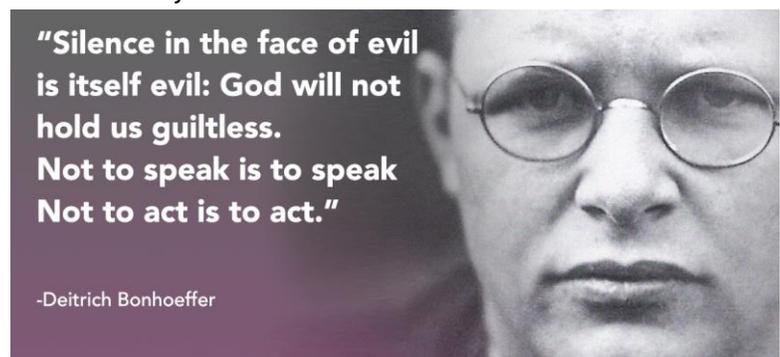
Who warned you to flee from "the wrath to come?" The "wrath to come" is God's judgment, the coming of God's reign, the kingdom of God. Both Jesus and John preached about it. This was when justice and righteousness shall prevail and those who have opposed God's will shall suffer the consequences. Yet John gives hope: there is still time to turn around. That is what repentance means; turning around. There's time to change! John urged a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Be baptized in the Jordan River and get in line with God's justice! And that's exactly what Jesus does. Luke 3: 21: "now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying . . ."

The crowds, including Jesus, were convicted by John's apocalyptic message "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." They plead with John: tell us what we should do? "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher,

what should we do?’¹³ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’¹⁴ 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.’” In other words, do ordinary acts of justice to keep society well ordered. Those who have food and clothing need to share. Tax collectors were known for extortion and stealing from the poor. Soldiers were known for doing the same. To both of these John said, “Stop it.” In other words, stop being greedy. Jesus heard John say all this. For the rest of Luke’s gospel this theme of doing justice and sharing with the poor will come up again and again.

To apply all this to our lives today, I want to go back to Tip O’Neill: all politics is local. At this moment (today on January 7th), and tomorrow might be different, but from where I am right now I can’t help but believe that if John the Baptist were here he’d tell Donald Trump the same things he told the crowds at the Jordan River: stop being greedy. All sin, including greed, has both personal and social dimension. John the Baptist, Jesus and Christians in the Methodist tradition all agree: sin is personal and social. Human psychology and narcissistic tendencies on the part of the President have always played a role in the drama that has been the Trump presidency for the past four years. And there is also the simple human tendency for greed. The spectacle of the mob assaulting the U.S. capitol: isn’t this a result of human greed? One person’s merciless quest for acquiring and maintaining and refusing to give up political power? And the refusal to listen to the voices of reason saying it’s time to quit and let go?

So, we in Baraboo ask the question the crowds asked John in the wilderness: “what then should we do?” Two things: the first is when you see you’ve gone the wrong way, turn around. Repent. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If repentance is good for the people, then it’s good for the pastor. Confession is good for the soul. So I repent of not speaking out forcefully against a President whose authoritarianism and self-serving manner clearly threaten to undermine our democracy. And that is what we’ve seen in this past week. I have failed the test which Dietrich Bonhoeffer posed in his courageous stand against fascism in Germany in the 1930’s: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” And I repent.



The second part of “what should we do” is to stop being greedy for me. Pastors are tempted to be greedy for more praise, more love, to please more people, for more security. What quest for more tempts you? Don’t be greedy. Be content with what you have. Even if you have the power to take what doesn’t belong to you, resist it. Just because you can do something that benefits yourself, it doesn’t mean you should. Think of what the world would be like if we could accomplish this! If we

could stop being greedy! The kingdom of God would come on earth as it is in heaven! That is the dream, the vision that was at the heart of both John the Baptist's and Jesus' ministries. It was a spiritual reality and a ground game. It's how we live each day that matters. All politics is local. The kingdom of God is local. As we choose to live justly, the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. And our prayer, "thy will be done," is answered through us.

I end by asking you to pray with me the prayer Jesus taught us: Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.