

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Luke 3: 7-18 and Phil 3: 3-11

I'm pleased to announce this morning a tremendous fund-raising venture. I expect our resident entrepreneur, Steve Boulter, to jump right on board with this. This fund-raising venture is a line of greeting cards featuring John the Baptist. After all, John is an edgy figure for edgy times. Some of the greetings to be found within these cards might include: "Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers." Or, "may your holidays be full of repentance." Or my personal favorite, "drink your cocoa, and remember the coming wrath." What do you think?! Now, it's just a start, but I think I'm on to something here.

Well, as you can probably detect, this is just my dry sense of humor coming through again. But I do think John's fervency tends to interrupt the Christmas feel. What is more, I tend to think John embarrassed his mother Elizabeth on more than a few occasions. John the Baptist is a pietist of sorts, and pietists are a kind of a necessary annoyance. They want to know if your faith is true, real, or personal. They are voices advocating for fervency, sincerity, and authenticity in one's faith. Wikipedia defines Pietism as "a movement within Lutheranism in 17th century Germany that combines its emphasis on biblical doctrine with the Reformed emphasis on individual piety and living a vigorous Christian life." Pietists are critical of established religion and non-thinking involvement in religious life. "Going through the motions" is one common critique leveled by such folks. So, while the rest of us may like comfortable rhythms, nothing annoys a pietist more.

Now John came long before the term pietism was introduced, obviously. Prophetic was more of the term in his day. Prophets called the king, or the people, back to what it means to live by God's law and be God's people. The prophetic can be affronting. Waking up one's listeners. And like the poem suggests, we are sometimes slow to listen, slow to break from our assumptions and rhythms, and so like an exasperated parent who is not being heard, John seems to up his rhetoric.

"You brood of vipers!" he says to his gathered congregation of sorts there on the banks of the Jordan. Can you imagine if I stood up here and began a sermon like that? "You brood of vipers!" Venomous. Dangerous. I don't imagine that would go well, and I don't foresee such a sermon intro. However, I could imagine leading with such words in a few places or groups, and enthusiastically so. I'll spare you my list, but I'll tell you that it is lengthy. Perhaps you have your own.

But if you consider your own list, what is it that gets your ire? And perhaps you can relate to John's fervency and frustration. He is calling those who claim to know God's promises, those who claim to be serious about what it means to be faithful. He is confronting them about their authenticity, confronting them about their mixed allegiances, their going through the motions. And he is directing them back to God's instruction and hope for a coming kingdom. He calls them to turn, to make themselves ready. To apply that fervency, sincerity, and authenticity in their daily life.

Bear fruits worthy of repentance, John says. Like the prophets of biblical tradition and pietists of the Reformed and Puritan traditions, John was intent on pointing out the inconsistency between religious practice and the fruits of one's life. You can imagine how offended his listeners might be, for someone who has spent their life in the synagogue to be accused of actually being a venomous snake.

Larry Lahr was a pietist. Larry introduced me to Young Life in my late teens. But before that I would see Larry at these summer gatherings in Canandaigua, NY. He would single me out to ask direct questions like "what is God teaching you?" He wasn't one to assume that we are all Christians and all is good. He wanted to know specifics. What is God teaching you? Not last year, or last month, or even last week. Since Young Life was an outreach program, he wanted to know who you were reaching out to? If God calls us to proclaim the gospel he wanted to know who you are proclaiming to. He wasn't one to accept the notion that we all are loving, and we just love everybody. He wanted to know who are you loving? What is the name? Why is it hard?

Keith Green was a Christian musician who I listened to back in the season when I would see Larry Lahr. He was famous for saying that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to Burger King makes you a hamburger. Now I think ritualist theorists would probably disagree severely with Keith Green on this. But what Keith Green wanted to say was that being a Christian is personal and calls for fervency, response, relationship with God, and action—applying that faith to life. He wanted to say that one can attend church without having those things.

Like Keith Green who said not to take pride in having your butt in the pew, John calls to his crowd not to trust their genetics or bloodline. Being that faith and ancestry were so closely tied in Jewish tradition, John says, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'" Do not rely on your bloodline or your ancestry, or your proximity to the land of Israel. Just because you are born into Israel doesn't mean a hill of beans to John. "Even now the ax is lying at the

root of the trees,” John says, “every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” In John’s words, I hear a little play on the word “tree”—tree like the family tree, the heritage you are attached to by virtue of your birth, the tree of Israel’s lineage and inheritance. And the metaphorical tree that is supposed to bear fruit, representing our lives and our living faith.

John is a little arresting in his directness. However, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks similarly to potential confidence in ancestry, of being of the right lineage, that Paul once viewed himself of importance for these reasons. Paul goes on to list all the reasons he has for taking pride. He lists the kinds of things he has valued, what he has invested himself in, what he thought was the most important at the time.

If you had to write your own list, like Paul’s, what would you say that you take pride in? What have you invested yourself in? What have you viewed as being most important along the way? I suspect much of what we would say would reflect not necessarily the values of the church, or of Christ, but rather our culture, or our place as Americans, or our family of origins. And folks like Larry Lahr, Keith Green, John the Baptist, and Paul would want to know more.

Bear fruit worthy of repentance, John would say. To those coming and going, John says repent. He says don’t assume you are ready to see the kingdom coming, don’t assume you are embodying the values of God’s coming kingdom. He would push us towards self-reflection and a deepening walk.

But lest John be trapped in overly general claims, we are told that people kept coming to be baptized by him in the Jordan, and they ask, “What then should we do?” And John, with the specificity of Larry Lahr, responds. “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.”

John seems to be directing them in ways to create change for themselves, and to work against the culturally acceptable. Find ways within the constraints of life to repent, to turn, to make yourself ready and available so that you may bear the fruits worthy of God’s people, worthy of a people that are making themselves ready for God’s coming kingdom.

Fruit worthy of repentance. A tree that bears fruit.

And if John were with us, baptizing in the South Platte, and we were to go out to him, and we asked him, what do we do now? What would he say to us? How might he direct us to create change for ourselves within the constraints of life and work against the culturally acceptable? What might be that fruit that we can bear to show ourselves worthy of a people repenting, turning, and anticipating the kingdom of God?

Within the constraints of our lives, of people who have our comings and goings rather mapped out, how can we create change for ourselves within those interactions. How can we bring the sincerity, fervency, and passion of our faith back into our daily rhythms and choices of our lives?

Paul says that all these things that he took pride in don't matter that much anymore. He goes so far to call these things rubbish, at least in comparison with knowing Christ. He wants to know Christ and be caught up in the movement of Christ, of death and resurrection, of knowing Christ in all things.

In this season of Advent, it is a fitting time to consider what John would say to us and how we might make changes within the constraints of life that demonstrate a readiness and willingness to participate and to proclaim a different way, God's kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven.

John's appeals come off a little caustic, making his insulting language a bit of a humorous pairing with seasonal greetings, and thus our greeting card venture a promising one. And his language takes on tones of judgment, and he and other pietists can get a little overzealous at moments to the point that they take on a negative tone, a heaviness that turns others away. We might go the other direction when we see him coming. He is too much for us. But like that exasperated parent who has taken on a dark tone, they mean well, wishing for our best.

In the last line of Nye's poem, she writes that as the boat that has been trying to get your attention bobs off into the distance, "you probably realized / you had always loved the sea." There is something in us, that despite our resistance to change or our distractedness, wants to follow, wants a new direction, wants to press closer to knowing Christ, wants a new way for our hearts and our relationships.

Therefore, I suggested that pietists are an annoyance, but necessary. Because they try to awaken us to the very things we desire deep down. John wants us to be ready to grasp just how momentous it is when God visits the world. He wants us to be in

awe when one comes who is so high in rank that we ought not to touch his sandals, and when that one so high in rank washes our feet, and forgives our sins, and show us a love that transforms our love, a love that awakens our hearts, hopes, and desires. He would hate for us to miss how significant all this is. And I expect we would not want to miss it either.

And all God's people said...

### Luke 3: 7-18

<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>17</sup> 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.”

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

### Philipians 3: 3-11

<sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup> even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

<sup>7</sup> Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

<sup>8</sup> More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.