

Then

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First Presbyterian Church, Durham
Luke 3:1-17

It takes a lot to make John the Baptist feel awkward. He's like a senior on the last day of high school, about to go far away for college and not looking back. He doesn't care a lick what anyone thinks anymore. He wears camel's hair, which is what they used to make tents out of, and probably only looks and feels good on camel. He eats bugs, wild honey and anything else that he can grab on his way to and from the Jordan River. That river is his office, by the way, which means he's wearing a wet tent every day, which must feel gross. Meanwhile, he's spitting fire and brimstone at anyone who cares to listen, especially the people in power, the ones who can get him kicked out of town, locked up, or killed, which they eventually do. You are a bunch of snakes, he says, and God is going to chop you up and burn you, which sounds more like the anger of a particularly mean eight-year-old having a meltdown, than the theology of someone you want baptizing your baby. John is unflappable. John is fearless. John has no shame. John is all doom and dire consequences, and absolutely no delicacy or social grace. And we'll come back to him.

I bet you've seen some of the end-of-the-decade lists that have been floating around everywhere the last few weeks. The best ACC basketball games of the decade. (Duke-Carolina, of course.) The most influential tech advances of the decade. (Smart phones.) The most important musical act of the decade. (Beyonce.) All silly and fun and designed to make even the youngest among us feel old. What have been missing, however, are the silly and fun think-pieces about the 2020s. Yes, there are articles, but they aren't celebratory or optimistic. Because things just feel done. Sad. Scary. We hear about the ticking clock on climate change. We are confronted more and more with the limitations, liabilities and lament of social media and technology. Government is difficult and divided. Mental health seems more and more compromised. A new war looms. Meanwhile, the last war hasn't really gone away. So much of the world seems on the decline, and nothing is going to change. Name one big picture thing you're really excited about, right now. It's hard, right? These are hard days to live in. They have been for a while, and they seem like they will be for a while longer. We share in John's wet burlap – the whole world seems wrapped in it. It's all such a mess and so very uncomfortable. Doom and dire consequences, as far as the eye can see.

But time is a funny thing, especially in the Bible. It speeds up and slows down and sometimes even does loopy-loops. We imagine it as a straight line from beginning to middle to end. So many of us began to learn Bible passages as children, when all good stories start with a beginning, followed by a middle, culminating in an end. But as we grow and evolve, we learn that it doesn't always work that way. The waters of baptism loop back to Moses parting the Red Sea, which loops back to the waters of creation, all overflowing with new life. Psalms of lament are ones in which people cry out to God from places of hopelessness and fear. But they almost always end in total praise for the Divine. So, we have to imagine great pauses within the text, years-long pauses, because we all know there is an ocean between hopelessness and praise.

Friends, I think we are living in the middle of one of those great pauses right now, when time has slowed to a crawl. So is John. We can't see it on the page. But that doesn't mean it's

not there. John is stuck in a great pause between the end of verse 12 – “but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” – and the beginning of verse 13 – “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan.” We know more about unquenchable fire, these days, more than we ever have before. Metaphorical and literal, slow-burns and raging infernos, this is an age of fires, my friends. So, John is a man for our time. It’s not hard to imagine some of our ninth graders with Instagram stories full of pictures of John preaching overlaid on a shot of the Australian wildfires. “Okay, Boomer,” he shouts. And as I so often do, I wonder where I am standing – where we are standing – when he does. Perhaps we are listlessly listening from the relative comfort of the riverbank, while the prophet is waste deep in the Jordan. We wonder if that water can put out these fires, or at least keep them at bay. We are stuck.

But Then...

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.” And a comedy of manners breaks out, like something out of Jane Austen. (I like to keep my pop culture references razor sharp and up-to-date.) This gross, sopping-wet, borderline-crazy person starts falling all over himself to show the proper respect, like Elizabeth Bennet or Mr. Darcy, to the one who has just approached him. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” he blurts out. The man, who fears no one and will baptize anything that moves, fears Jesus and would rather not dunk him in the Jordan. This is clearly something our early Christian forebears struggled with, for it seems to indicate that Jesus is not sinless (which is blasphemy) or that John had a greater authority than Christ in those early days (which is also blasphemy). Jesus ought to baptize John, we know. So, Matthew makes a point of John deferring to Jesus, in order to cut down on the blasphemy, you see.

But I think John was just flustered because the pause had ended. Time had lurched into motion again, as if it were driving stick-shift. A lifetime of waiting for the Then had finally come to a close, and he didn’t know how to act, or where to put his hands, or what to say. This was the Then he had been waiting for, the great, divine What’s Next, the end of the lament and the beginning of praise, the waters of new life looping around again to wash him. His Then had finally arrived. In fact, everyone’s Then had arrived, he believed, and we might believe, too – the Then of God. Just like Anna and Simeon, those two old saints from Luke’s Gospel, who were looking forward to the consolation of Israel, John can die in peace now that he has seen Jesus – the consolation, the hope, the fulfillment, the unpausing of God’s time. Jesus is everything John was expecting and more, more than that professional crazy-person could put into words, leaving him stammering like the sympathetic family that has been crushed by life only to win a new house on Ellen. Then, Jesus comes from Galilee. Then, John’s life is forever changed. Then. Oh, thank God.

There is always a Then.

That’s the good news. That’s the news that brings us back here week after week. That’s the promise that invites us to wander in on a random Sunday. No matter how bad the news of the day is, there is always a Then. The promise of the Gospel today is that we live perched on the precipice of verse 12, surrounded by unquenchable fire, but the great Then is just around the corner, just off-stage, waiting to swoop in like a dove. There is Friday, full of crucifixion and death and despair. And Then, Sunday, Sunday with its impossible reality of resurrection and new life and hope upon hope.

And what better way to signal a great, new Then *than* with a baptism, especially for one so practiced in them? Perhaps you have sensed the divine Then when you have seen a baptism in person, when Mindy or Joe or Sam or Marilyn or someone else has walked down an aisle, with a

baby in their arms. At that moment, there's hope in the room. Joy. Grinning expectation. It doesn't matter if the child is all cooing and big eyes or is screaming bloody murder, we all laugh and glow and imagine and hope. A great and good Then, that this child will be just a little like Christ, beloved by and well pleasing to God's own self. A reminder that we, perhaps, are also just a little like Christ, beloved by and pleasing to God's own self. There is no better Then *than* a baptism, no stronger promise that the world we know is not all there is. That the future will be different from the past. The waters of new life are looping around yet again, and we are squarely in their path.

So, what do we do with that? The hope we renew, the baptism we trust, the movement of God after what seems like a lifetime of wet camel's hair waiting – what do we do with them? The text doesn't tell us. Jesus is about to head out to be tempted in the wilderness. But we are not Jesus. Don't try to be Jesus. John disappears from the story for a while, and the next time we see him his head will quite literally be on Herod's platter. But we are not John, either. It's okay not to be John. Remember, we are standing on the banks of the Jordan river, having just seen John and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove.

So, let's grab a bucket. The water's already here, right? Blessed and holy as much any body of water has ever been throughout all time. Grab a bucket. Fill it up, and take it with you until you encounter the next fire. Collect a bucket-full of resurrection hope to douse the next bonfire of despair you see. Fill your pail with Christ's love to slosh the smoldering embers of hate just around the corner. Submerge your vessel so it comes back up brimming with new life, and pour it out where there is only death. And when it's empty, come back to the river for more, because there's plenty. Maybe even enough for all the fires out there. Grab a bucket, my friends. Amen.