



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 3:1-18

December 8, 2024

Preaching By A River

I'm finally getting around to reading Robin Kimmerer's popular book Braiding Sweetgrass. Early in the book, she describes a Native American man from Alaska who would routinely introduce himself as "a boy who was raised by a river." She loved the double-meaning of his words. Did he mean he grew up near to a river, or was the river responsible for raising him, for teaching him the things he needed to know?¹ Kimmerer assumed that on some level, both meanings were true. That idea is both a good starting point and ending point for our conversation today about John the Baptist.

When artists portray John the Baptist, they invariably include three things. He is shown wearing rough, camel's hair garments, clothing that links him back to the Old Testament prophet Elijah. Second, he carries a tall walking stick with a small crosspiece at the top, so that it resembles a cross and foreshadows the crucifixion of Jesus. And third, he is commonly pointing his finger. If the painting also includes Jesus, John will be pointing toward Jesus with the words "Behold the Lamb of God" artistically scrolling out of his mouth. He was the voice crying in the wilderness, pointing to the Savior while saying "Prepare the way of the Lord."

But in the passage we heard from Luke's gospel, John isn't pointing yet at Jesus. He's pointing at the crowds who've gathered around him, calling them a "brood of vipers" and telling them to bear fruits that reflect penitent and changed hearts. Three groups of listeners ask him, "What then should we do?" The first group was Jewish women and men who had believed that their ancestry from Abraham ensured favored status with God. But John says "That is not enough. Share what you have with those who have none." The second group included Jewish tax collectors who were cheating their fellow Jews by extorting extra taxes. John told them to cut that out. Finally, a third group was soldiers, possibly Roman Gentile officers working for the local authorities - non-Jews, yet on that day seeking a right relationship with God. To them John said, "Stop abusing your power for personal gain."

There's a logical order in how this passage unfolds. John first spoke to the people of faith - people who were regular temple-goers, good souls who come to church every Sunday and told them to share their belongings. Next John talked to the people on the margins whose lifestyle earned others' suspicion and disdain, and told them to lead lives of integrity. Finally John talked to the outsiders, people with whom no one had a close relationship, and warned them not to abuse their power. Notice how John challenged all three groups equally. All of them needed to bear fruit worthy of

repentance, yet all three groups were equally invited to step into the waters of baptism and by their actions demonstrate a new life with God.

Do you remember how the early space shuttle flights included crew members from all over the world? The story is told how on the first day in orbit, these shuttle astronauts would excitedly point out their home countries as seen from outer space. By the third day, they would simply point out the different continents. But by the fifth day, they only saw one earth floating below them. In a similar way, the people who gathered to hear John the Baptist preach initially knew what group they belonged to. But John's preaching made it clear that such social categories are not how God sees the world. God sees what unites us, not what separates us – and for better or worse, in the eyes of God all of us are called to bear fruit reflecting a spirit of repentance.

Now here's where I had to make a choice in preparing this sermon. I've introduced John the Baptist out there pointing his finger at the diverse crowd standing before him. The logical next step for me as a preacher is to emphasize what John is telling us about how to live and maybe introduce a modern example of the faithful behavior John is hoping we'll exhibit from now on. Let's try that out and see how it works. John is talking to three groups of people, telling them to share their food and clothing, to neither cheat others out of their money nor take advantage of some because of positions of power. If we had to summarize this message, it basically comes down to economics and the proper use of our possessions. Back then as now, there was a wide disparity in what people possess. So if you have a lot, share it with those who don't. Be honest in your dealings with others. Don't take advantage of anyone, but act with integrity toward all. During this season of year-end appeals for donations and our annual Alternative Christmas Market, that message seems particularly appropriate.

And taking this idea further, what is true for us as individuals is also true for us as nations, as we struggle to co-exist on this one fragile planet. I read an article this week that talked about a frightening byproduct of the wars in the Middle East, whether in Iraq or now in Syria and Gaza. The damage caused by bombs, whether dropped by American, Syrian or Israeli military, is easy to see and horrible to contemplate. But the World Health Organization now warns that antibiotic resistant infections are one of the leading global health threats in today's world. Drug resistant bacteria is classified in three ways: multidrug resistant, extensively drug resistant, and pan-drug resistant – meaning resistant to every treatment available.

Alexander Fleming first stumbled onto penicillin back in 1928. It was mass produced in the 1940s and saved thousands of lives in World War II. But the development of new antibiotics peaked almost 50 years ago. Meanwhile war zones in which infrastructure is bombed, depriving people of hospital care, medicine and clean water turn entire countries into Petri dishes of bacteria and fungi resistant to known treatments. Some estimate that 20% of ICU infections globally are pan-drug resistant, and that percentage

can only increase. As a doctor in Baghdad said, "Wars can kill thousands, but bacteria kills millions...The world is a small village. The infection that happens in Delhi can have consequences in America and vice versa. Your [preventative] measures are useless if they are not applied in all the world at the same time."²

John the Baptist stills cries out to the crowds, pointing his finger at us, telling us to do better with our possessions, be better in our relationships with one another, and do better in following the Prince of Peace. This sermon can reinforce that message and even expand on it by pointing to our responsibility to stop the bombs falling on Gaza. But frankly a sermon focused only on John's message can sound too moralizing. People simply don't respond well when told "this is what you should do," even when that message is exactly what they need to hear. Something needs to be added to John's preaching.

And then I remembered where John was standing while he was preaching - by a river. And I remembered the Native American tribal leader saying, "I was raised by a river." Kimmerer would have us walk gently over this earth - to take only what we need and to give back in return for whatever we take. We are to live in reciprocity and mutual respect with one another and this planet. This is not some shallow thinking by illiterate ancestors. This is a deep wisdom about sustainability from those far better at its practice than we have proved to be.

I was raised by pastures and creeks, in both senses of those words: tall grass you would walk through in summer, disturbing grasshoppers while hopefully avoiding snakes; small gurgling streams where hours would go by building dams or clearing away stones; knowing that whenever I'd return, the water would still be there flowing on its way. What raised you? Was it a patch of trees near your home that you could climb or explore? Was it a field where you could lie on your back to study the clouds? Were you raised by the shore of Lake Michigan - its rocky fringe, its chilly water, its blue-gray expanse stretching to the far horizon? You had a relationship with something in nature and it raised you, educated you about the wonder of this world. What was it for you?

John called the crowds to step into the waters of the Jordan River - waters indifferent to what they wore or what they were worth; waters that sustained life and washed clean anyone who stepped into them; waters that were a gift of God for the people of God. John knew that about the river behind him and that's why he chose to preach his sermons there.

Maybe that's why every Advent we are called to join John by the banks of the river. To first remember where we were raised - to remember those early relationships with God's world that involved wind and water and soil and likely taught us far more than church sermons and Sunday School classes. The point is this: If we can live honorably, humbly, with the waters that raised us, surely we can extend that same grace and respect

to one another. When we are tempted to ask John the Baptist, “What then I should do?”, remember that the first answer to that question actually comes from the river rolling by behind him, from the baptism waters that raised us. The river speaks to our soul and tells us to walk gently over this planet. Then John offers his advice to us as well: share what we have, treat all people fairly and justly, and never abuse our power or privilege. Together the river and the prophet speak to us this second Sunday in Advent. Listen well. AMEN

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 2015, p. 22.

² Francesca Mari, “The Germs of War,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 1, 2024.