

"Make Room"

Luke 3:7-18

"Is there room in your heart?"

"Is there room in your heart for God to write God's story?"

There was a family hiding from the storm that found no place at the keeper's door. It was for this a Child was born to save a world so cold and hollow. The sleeping town did not know that lying in a manger low, a Savior King who had no home has come to heal our sorrows.

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"Is there room in your heart for God to write God's story?"

Shepherds were counting sheep at night when told 'do not fear the glory light.' They were precious in God's sight for God has come to raise the lowly. A mother holds the promise tight that every wrong will be made right. The road is straight, the burden's light, for we are in God's hands and God holds tomorrow.

"Is there room in your heart?"

"Is there room in your heart for God to write God's story?"

We are to come as we are and know it will set us apart when we make room in our hearts and trade our dreams for God's glory.

"Is there room in our hearts for God to write God's story?"

(adapted from "Make Room" by Casting Crowns)

I think the invitation to make room in our hearts for God to write God's story is what John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness. John the Baptist actually takes it one step further and says make room in your life for God to write God's story. And since our heart is the keeper of our most treasured values and desires in life, where our heart rests is where our life rests. This is related to the questions we asked last week, "What are we pursuing in life? What are we looking for?" And subsequently, "In what, where, and to whom are we looking to be fulfilled?"

To be quite frank, I don't think any of us want to be chastised by John the Baptist this close Christmas. As we sit here today enveloped in thoughts of final Christmas preparations and purchases, we likely don't want to be challenged further. However, trying to avoid or sugarcoat John's words in his proclamation is just not possible. Faithful and fruitful arrival at

the manger will be possible only after the careful self-examination and recommitment called for by John.

I liken this to our family baking sugar cookies for Christmas growing up. We don't get the joy of eating those delicious treats unless there is some sugar, flour, eggs, and vanilla mixed and then chilled, flour spread on the counter, dough rolled and then cut and then trimmed, baked and then decorated. The process of baking can be ugly at times, (at least it was in our house with pans and rolling pins and flour and coconut for Santa's beard- raisins for Frosty's buttons- the mixer going and timers going off) but accepting the challenge and being willing to go through the process pays off in the end.

Much more important and life sustaining than sugar cookies, the recipe John the baptized is offering in his proclamation is one calling for the reprioritization and return to lives focused on the love of God and the love and care of neighbor. With love of God and love of neighbor the goal, a can't miss step in the process of developing the recipe requires us to make room in our hearts and lives for God to write God's story.

Whether we appreciate John the Baptist's approach or not, the story we encounter here in Luke 3 is one that wakes us up, directs us, and shows us how to best prepare for the Lord's coming. That means there may be other approaches we can try, but they will not be up to par with what is best. To be certain, the charge for us in our preparation for the Lord's coming is to not only believe but behave. Let's explore further.

Perhaps the most enlightening element of John's preaching that leads us are his responses to the repetitive question he is asked by the people. After calling them a "brood of vipers" and calling them out for not bearing good fruit, John the Baptist is asked by three different groups of people referred to as the crowd, tax collectors, and soldiers, "what then should we do?" The people were wondering what it was going to take for them to know of John's teachings and prepare for the holy one who is coming. By asking, it seems they want to know what it looks like to bear good fruit and keep from being called a "viper" any longer.

John's responses are what make up the story line of God's story and therefore, are what we are charged to make room in our hearts and lives. To the crowds, John said, "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." To the tax collectors, John said, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." To the soldiers, John said, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages." In summary, John the Baptist is defining good fruit in the acts of sharing, keeping no more than you need, being fair, treating others with care, and being honest.

In further exploration we can derive from John the Baptist's preaching here in Luke that John commands each group slightly differently, according to their roles and possessions. Whereas all of us are called to turn from ways that bear bad fruit (John explicitly refers to this as repentance), not all of us are going to be turning from and to the exact same things. Some of us might share in our ministry together, but all of us together are needed to fulfill God's charge and call.

For example, John admonishes the crowds to share their wealth, whether food or clothing, with those less fortunate. They are not commanded to distribute everything they have and thus become the needy and naked, but to share from excess, however minimalistically defined. John's command to the tax collectors is to be fair and honest in their work in a field known for its corruption and greed. John's last command to the soldiers, a rather surprising group of participants, is a warning about the greed their position has enabled them to act upon.

To which of these might you most relate. Be honest in your self-examination and don't sell yourself or others short. It is possible the responsibilities you have in life relate to all three, thus calling you to respect all three charges.

Acts of sharing, keeping no more than we need, being fair, treating others with care, and being honest! Isn't this the least of what we understand it means to be the church? Isn't this the least of what we understand it means to be a faithful follower of Christ?

If yes, then what John the Baptist is preaching is not new. These acts may be pushed aside or forgotten or ignored, but these acts are not new. John the Baptist is reminding all of us that as God's children we are all responsible to God's charge and call for us to bear good fruit. As God's children we must always seek to live faithfully, whether Christ is coming in two weeks, two days, two hours, or two hundred years.

'What should we do?' Make room in our hearts and lives for God to write God's story. When we do, we embody a trust in God and God's work and will.

I have three illustrations that help bring John the Baptist's preaching to the forefront of our Christmas preparations this year.

The first is the illustration of a tree. John the Baptist shares the charge and call to bear good fruit. Thus, we are to be a tree, by bearing fruit of integrity by sharing, by caring for persons in our charge, by acting with equity and justice. The way we do this is by rooting and remaining connected to the only true source of life that can lead us and provide for us. Only with Christ, in Christ, and through Christ, the one who is coming, are we able to become a fertile tree.

The second illustration could be a license plate or bumper sticker; however, I would recommend it first as a stamp upon our heart and life. "M68DOLVWK"

In Micah 6:8, Micah responds to his own question of emphasis, "What then does the Lord require?", by saying "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." At another time and place perhaps can't you picture John addressing the question, "What is it that we are to do?" with "Do. Love. Walk."? All of us are to not only believe in the things God asks us to do, as if we have memorized them for a test, but behave by doing the right things. All of us are to love; love God and love others. All of us are to walk humbly with God; not lift ourselves up but give God the glory and honor and praise.

The third illustration is a prayer. The specifics of the prayer are to ask God to help us make room in our hearts and lives for God to write God's story by gently opening us up. We have used some of Ted Loder's creative writings before in worship and we have actually used this very prayer before during Advent. What I appreciate about this prayer the most is its ability to name what is really at stake. Namely, our weakness in falling in love with darkness, even when what we really want is light; our weakness in demanding control, even when we know we need help; our weakness in squandering away our true call to serve God for convenience or ease or short-term celebration, even when we say we want the benefits that come only with sacrifice. Prayer has the power to heal and transform, and this prayer asks for just that, because when we are open to God's indwelling and God's stamp on our life, we can't help but be transformed and renewed in the fullness of God's love and light.

Rather than simply read the prayer, I am going to invite Kathleen and Catherine to join me, and I am going to ask all of us to enter into a time of prayer together. We will conclude our time of prayer with the Lord's Prayer.

"Gentle Us Open" by Ted Loder

- P:** Lord of Life and Light, help us not to fall in love with the darkness that separates us from you and from each other,
C: but to watch large-eyed, wide-hearted, open-handed, eager-minded for you,
P: to dream and hunger and squint and pray for the light of you and life for each other.
- C:** (*longer pause*) Lord, amidst our white-knuckled, furrow-faced busy-ness in this season, we realize deep within us that your gifts of mercy and light, peace and joy, grace upon grace can be received only if we are unclenched open. So this is our prayer, Lord:

ALL: Open us!

- K:** Gentle us open, pry [us], shock [us], tickle [us open], beguile, knock, amaze, squeeze, any wily way you can us open. Open us to see your glory in the coming again of the light of each day, [in] the light in babies' eyes and lovers' smiles, [in] the light in the glaze of weariness that causes us to pause, [in] the light of truth wherever spoken and done.
- P:** (*longer pause*) Open us to songs of angels in the thumping of traffic, in the rustle of shoppers, the canopy of pre-dawn silence, in the hum of hope, the wail of longing within us, in the cries of our brothers and sisters for justice and peace, and in our own souls' throb toward goodness.
- C:** (*shorter pause*) Open us, then, to share the gifts you have given us and to the deep yearning to share them gladly and boldly,
- K:** to sweat for justice, to pay the cost of attention, to initiate the exchange of forgiveness,
- P:** to risk a new beginning free of past grievances, to engage with each other in the potluck of joy and to find the gifts of a larger love and deeper peace.
- K:** (*longer pause*) Open us, Lord of miracles of the ordinary, to the breath-giving, heart-pounding wonder of birth, a mother's fierce love, a father's tender fidelities, a baby's barricade-dissolving burble and squeak,
- C:** that we may be born anew ourselves into the "don't be afraid" fullness of your image, the fullness of a just and joyful human community, the fullness of your kingdom, in the fullness of your time; through the eternal grace of your son, our brother, Jesus, who taught his disciples of every time and place to pray together... **Our Father... Amen.**