

# First Christian Church



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Sermon • January 10, 2021 • Luke 3:1-22

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<https://youtu.be/xtZ9DpcrOLw>

It took a long time to start typing the sermon this morning. I most always put my sermons on the page Sunday morning after letting it simmer in my brain for a week or two. And today there is so much roiling around that it is hard to know where to start, what to put in and when is enough.

We are a congregation that is diverse in thought and strong in opinion. I value that. And at times like this, it makes it difficult. So I am going to begin by letting the text speak. We have come through the Christmas season – we have heard the stories told and retold and this year, we journey with the Gospel of Luke. Luke takes more time than any other gospel writer setting up the story so that we feel we have a sense of Jesus and his family as devout Jews who followed the laws as they were able. We also have a sense of the world around Jesus and that context is important. Hear now from:

## Luke 3:1-22 Common English Bible

*3 In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler<sup>[a]</sup> over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler<sup>[b]</sup> over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler<sup>[c]</sup> over Abilene, <sup>2</sup> during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God’s word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins.<sup>4</sup> This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,*

*A voice crying out in the wilderness:*

*“Prepare the way for the Lord;  
make his paths straight.*

*<sup>5</sup> Every valley will be filled,  
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

*The crooked will be made straight  
and the rough places made smooth.*

*<sup>6</sup> All humanity will see God’s salvation.”<sup>[d]</sup>*

*<sup>7</sup> Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. <sup>9</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”*

*<sup>10</sup> The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”*

*<sup>11</sup> He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”*

*<sup>12</sup> Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”*

*<sup>13</sup> He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”*

*<sup>14</sup> Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?”*

*He answered, “Don’t cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”*

*Responses to John*

*<sup>15</sup> The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ.<sup>16</sup> John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me*

is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." <sup>18</sup> With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. <sup>20</sup> He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison.

<sup>21</sup> When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened<sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

May we seek God's guidance in the hearing, the understanding and the living into this sacred story.

Let's begin with the context – it is important. Luke starts by telling us the political and religious so that it sets John and Jesus in a time and place. This isn't like saying 1904 so that we don't have expectations of cars or internet. He mentions Tiberius. A military genius who fought campaigns throughout what is now Europe. Tiberius used taxation and conscription for his battles. Amy Jill Levine tells us, "At the time of Luke's writing, many regarded Tiberius as both violent and perverse." She goes on to say, "According to Roman historian Tacitus, Tiberius killed all suspected traitors, such that here lay, singly or in heaps the unnumbered of every age and sex, the illustrious with the obscure."

It could be taken from our recent headlines in that Tiberius was known for depravity in the sexual abuse of children and women. ***The Gospel of Luke: New Cambridge Bible Commentary***  
By: [\*Amy-Jill Levine, Ben Witherington III\*](#)

It is a harsh time for those living in and around Jerusalem. And into that harshness there are still prophets like John – prophets in the vein of Amos and Jeremiah, Micah and Daniel. John is calling the people to repent, to turn around, to take another way from the one they are taking. John is calling them to remember God's vision for creation. John doesn't have nice pithy sayings like Micah – Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. Or Habakkuk - Write a vision and make it plain upon a tablet so that a runner can read it.

But John is calling them back – back to what who they said they were as beloved children of God. Now John's tactics aren't ones that I particularly like. They are similar to the ones I grew up with. Revivals with hundreds of people under a tent with a preacher preaching hellfire and brimstone if I didn't immediately come to the front and repent. Some of you have attended these. Our Disciples of Christ came out of such a movement called the Great Awakening.

John turns to the people who have responded to his call and says, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?" Or as another translations says, "You brood of vipers..."

Perhaps he was just trying to get their attention. And seemingly it worked as he attracted crowds when he was preaching. And here is something I love about Luke's telling of the story. John is practical in his expectations. And he is willing to answer in specifics. Those who have read ahead will know that we will meet tax collectors and soldiers who acknowledge and follow Jesus. John gives us a glimpse that these people too are open to the good news in that they are present and asking what should I do?

And John gives them a baseline – he doesn't tell them to sell all that they have or find a new vocation. He tells the tax collector not to gouge those he collects taxes from. It was a bit of a free market for tax collectors. They signed a contract with Rome indicating how much they would pay to Rome for the right to collect taxes from a segment of people or from a particular section of road. And then they would add on what they would keep for their living. <sup>12</sup>*Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"*

<sup>14</sup>*Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?"*

*He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay." Don't loot or steal from the people whose land you are occupying. This is your profession, do it ethically.*

And when the crowds asked - <sup>11</sup>*He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same."*

This is a pretty low baseline – though not always an easy one. And it is the basis for Jewish community. Be fair. Take care of one another. Don't take excess or hoard when others are in need. When part of a community, your actions impact others. When you sin – when you take advantage of someone, that impacts the larger community, not that one individual or household. When you are generous, the same is true. It impacts not just one, but all of those who are impacted by the life of that one.

John is telling them it isn't in who they say they are – descendants of Abraham, but rather in how they are living that out. What are people seeing them do? What is God seeing them do? Repent. Turn onto the path that leads to God. And there are more than one of those – they are different for each of us.

I have recently been reading "The Time is Now" by Joan Chittister. In it she speaks of Prophetic Spirituality. I know – there are a lot of types of spirituality – Ignatian spirituality is one of my favorites. A quick google search turned up: Mystical Spirituality, Authoritarian Spirituality (this is the spirituality of my mother and brother,) Intellectual Spirituality, Service Spirituality and so one. So so many different ways to live into your faith and understand it.

In the introduction to the book Chittister says that *a prophet is one who says no to everything that is not of God. It is the spirituality of awareness, of choice, of risk, of transformation. It is about the embrace of life, the pursuit of wholeness, the acceptance of others, the call to co-creation.* Chittister, Joan. The Time Is Now (p. 16). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

*A prophetic act aligns the world with the Will of God—even if ignored in the public field of play. The prophetic soul walks in the footsteps of Jesus, who contested with the Pharisees about laws that violated the greater traditions of the Torah. Jesus contested the corban, for example—a temple tax that served to free a younger generation from caring for their elderly parents as long as they donated to the Temple. A clever piece of religious chicanery, it defied the commandment to "Honor your parents" and enriched the pockets of the Temple staff, instead. That kind of struggle between the Word of God and the hypocrisy of those who pretend to be just—but are not—has been the basis of popular protest for centuries.*

Chittister, Joan. The Time Is Now (p. 71). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

We are in a time that needs prophets. Though it is likely all times need prophets. However, in the times we are currently in, it is hard to find the prophets in all the noise. And so. Perhaps it is time we find the prophet within ourselves and begin the work we, as followers of Jesus are called to do.

It would be disingenuous to preach a sermon today and not touch on the events of the week. And as one who has been to a variety of protests and paid attention to the response to the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer, the prophet in me pushes me to say that when BLM headed to Washington, they were met with police on the steps of the capital in riot gear. If those engaged in the acts on Wednesday had black or brown skin, if they had worn headdresses, hajibs or turbans, the results would have been very different. We can talk about the reasons sometime if you would like and there are few who do not see that as true.

I wasn't online on Wednesday – I was working. And so I didn't have the adrenalin or even the devastation that many people suffered who were watching it. Something few of us could have imagined other than in the movies. When I heard what was happening, I turned to Reuters – one of the least bias news sources and read the updates they were doing in print. I had no desire to watch the play by play knowing I could catch up later. I talked to a church member who was very upset as she was watching, and I went home to a spouse who had been in tears.

I watched CBS to hear a bit of their news and see some of the videos. And I was simply angry. For a whole host of reasons anger was my first response. Reading the T-shirts – one that said Camp Auschwitz on the front and Staff on the back with 6mwe meaning 6 million wasn't enough. And watching the myriad of flags being carried. And that's where my mind focused for just a minute. It was surreal to see a confederate flag in the capitol but the flag that got most of my attention kept appear in videos – the person wasn't too far from the vantage of the camera man. It was a large flag with the fish symbol filling it up and the word Jesus in the center. And I kept trying to imagine Jesus there, in that crowd, moving with them and I couldn't. I wondered if that person truly believed they were following the Jesus of the gospels. I know we don't all have to agree on our theology to come together as Christians and while I love to debate, I couldn't figure out a way to debate that particular person's position. To be honest, it was a bit disorienting.

I have no need to rehash what happened any more than I have and there are a few pictures that I would lift up that go with those of that day – one is of the young women who, in the midst of the chaos thought to carry out the boxes containing the votes. One is of the congress men and women crouching under their seats with gas masks on – I didn't even know they had gas masks in the chambers. I wonder if they have to do as many active shooter drills as our kids do. One is of Representative Andy Kim, who when the rotunda had been cleared of people got on his hands and knees and began picking up trash. NBC News reports, ““I was just overwhelmed with emotion,” Kim, 38, told NBC Asian America. “It's a room that I love so much — it's the heart of the Capitol, literally the heart of this country. It pained me so much to see it in this kind of condition.”

So, for the next hour and a half, he crouched down and filled a half dozen trash bags with debris. When he finished cleaning up the rotunda, he began working on the adjacent rooms, including the National Statuary Hall and the Capitol crypt downstairs.

Then he returned to the House floor to debate Pennsylvania's vote count, a session that lasted until 3 a.m. By Thursday evening, he'd been awake for more than 36 hours.”

And the final picture is from a time before when Rev. Raphael Warnock was arrested while kneeling in prayer in protest in that same rotunda.

We can talk about who they were, how they got in, whether they meant to or not, what their intent was when they got in. And none of that matters in our faith journey. What matters most – to me as pastor, to this congregation is how we, each one of us, will make our prophetic witness to the world in ways large and small. We can feed the hungry and until we stay and pay attention and work to change things for those who are hungry, we are like hamsters on a wheel going nowhere. It isn't that feeding someone who is hungry isn't important – it is that it isn't enough. It isn't where we stop.

Whatever the issue that God puts on your heart – isn't that an old evangelical term that still rings true – those issues that simply won't let you go – how will you follow the example of the prophets, of Jesus and speak words and perhaps more importantly take actions that will make a difference.

Chittister warns those who are willing to step into the role of prophet. *“The prophet sets out to address an issue—not to annoy, irritate, and disgust the people whose attention is key. The prophet is loud, clear, and nonviolent. There is nothing self-serving in the actions of the prophet. On the contrary, prophets almost always suffer loss of social status and an increase of personal rejection, not to mention the legal punishment of the governments they confront. They pay the social cost imposed by societies still blind to their own violence, yet unconscious of their own social sins. And they do it to expose the systemic roots of the violence they confront.”* Chittister, Joan. *The Time Is Now* (pp. 73-74). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

*Most of all, the prophet is not impetuous, not a rabble-rouser, not emotionally overwrought or psychologically unbalanced. Instead, the prophet is deeply immersed in the spiritual depths of the tradition. They are fueled by the prayer that prays “Do unto others what you would have others do to you”; they give up a part of their own personal life to improve the lives of others and bring the world back to the Will of God for it. The prophet is a living example of the spiritual life with a purpose as large as the life around it. The questions for spiritual people today are simple: What message do people get from us? What sky do we light up so that others may find their way to new peace and clear justice in a violently unjust world?* Chittister, Joan. *The Time Is Now* (p. 74). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

We will not all change the world in ways that we can see. We may make it easier for those we seek to help for a time and yet the world is slow to change. We can see that in all kinds of ways once we are looking for it. And perhaps an old folk tell gives the best reason for us to start.

*Once upon a time an old woman ran through the streets shouting, “Power, greed, and corruption. Power, greed, and corruption.” For a while, people stopped to hear, to think, to discuss the problem. As time went by and nothing happened, they finally went back about their business. Finally, one day, a child stepped in front of the prophet to say as she ran by, “Old woman, no one is listening to you.” So, the woman stopped to say, “Oh, I know that.” The boy was puzzled. “Then if you know you have failed, why do you go on shouting?” And the old woman answered, “Oh, child, you do not understand. I do not shout in order to change them. I shout so that they cannot change me.”*

Chittister, Joan. *The Time Is Now* (p. 110). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The things that happen a world away are disturbing, they can be devastating. They can make us frustrated, anxious or just plain mad. And in the end, the question we have to ask ourselves is where are we taking a stand. What do people see or learn as a result of what we do? What becomes visible

by the light that we shine? This week and in the weeks that follow we are going to need prophets more than every – with COVID and politics, with systemic issues that have plagued us for generations being made ever more visible, the world needs people to follow Jesus in ways that Jesus would recognize. In this time, how will your light shine?