

What Now?

Scripture text: Luke 3:1-22

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If you've listened to these messages more than a couple of times you know that this first part is where I'd share a story or an anecdote. Preaching is a process for both you and me. It wouldn't help you to get into my message if I just jumped in and cut to the chase. And more often than not, the scripture text I'm considering reminds me of an experience I've had or a story I've heard. And more often than not my telling you about that experience or story reminds you of a story in turn.

But that's hard today. In these past few days I have found myself shaken and shocked and angry. I was shaken when I heard that a crowd was cheering on false statements and incendiary words in view of the White House. I was shocked when I saw that crowd milling around the Capitol grounds and acting violently inside the Capitol itself. I was angry when I heard their protestations that they thought they were there to stop an illegitimate process.

It's hard today. I prefer to take some time to digest events before I talk about them. But this week has not gone down very

easily for me. I was in tears at times on Wednesday afternoon and evening. I have become impatient for change to happen and consequences to be paid.

And...I am in the wilderness.

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There is no easy way to describe this wilderness I am in—this wilderness that perhaps you find yourself in as well.

Let's start here: these are outrageous times. There are already people starting to suggest that we should take this first month of the new year, just 10 days in, and give it back to 2 thousand 20. In these times we have longed for leadership to help guide us out of our collective troubles.

And we haven't found them, or they haven't arrived. We have found leaders preoccupied with improving their own situation. We have found leaders who are good people distracted by unhinged challenges to reality.

And we are left wondering where to turn. Who will address the pandemic? Who will address the damage that has been done to the ways by which we earn our livelihood? Who is looking out for us?

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And above all, the events of the past few days have left us with one defining question: What now? Where do we go from here?

Because we are at a loss as to how we will ever be able to have a meaningful talk with our neighbor. When our neighbor says outright that because of what we believe or who we support, we cannot even pick up a dialogue, that leaves us wondering, What now?

What now, when we are at a loss about whether it even makes sense to behave appropriately and morally. We still trust our own good intentions, but we worry that we will be shamed and labeled and derided for doing the right thing. We worry whether we even know what the right thing IS any more.

What now, when we are at a loss?

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Surely there has to be a way forward. We know there wasn't just a violent invasion but also a larger crowd milling around, confused as to why they were there and what they hoped to accomplish. The image of the young woman with tears streaming down her face telling a reporter she had tried to walk into the Capitol and had received a face full of tear gas comes to mind. Her astonishment and confusion radiates as the reporter presses her about her purpose for going in. She responds, "We were supposed to be having a revolution, and they Mace'd us. Why?"

Or, better, what now?

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Today's confusion and anger and misinformation are so descriptive of the times that heard John the Baptizer's voice. The competing forces and the abdication of engaged leadership in first-century Palestine had left a moral vacuum.

Luke even names the culprits in the guise of placing his story in time and history. There was Roman rule under the emperor Caesar Tiberias and his regional governor Pontius Pilate. There was a sort of ceremonial shadow of the Judean realm under the puppet king Herod. He had his brother Philip ruling a region up the road. And he had Philip's wife Herodias in his own bedchamber. There was religious life under the direction of the chief priests Annas and Caiphas for the elite of Jerusalem.

The various forces at the disposal of these three loci of government had set out to make their living on the back of the common people. The Roman empire had tributes and taxes. Herod extracted periodic tributes from the population with no rhyme or reason about how much or when. And the required ritual sacrifices at the Temple came with various "suggested" cuts for the priests and their attendants.

In none of this was there any thought for the everyday welfare of the people of Judea. The gulf between the life they were expected

to follow and the example their leaders set was complete. It became a “thing” for crowds of people to gather around rumors of prophets and to go en masse to hear them. They hoped to be seen as at least trying to learn what was the right thing to do.

And it was in this environment that John laid out his condemnation of life as it was.

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After that blistering sermon preached to the dilettantes something remarkable happened. The crowd started asking “What do we do now?”

And rather than continuing to excoriate them...John responds. He gives them simple things to do.

Give your extra coat away. Give your extra food away.

Collect only what is owed.

Don't blackmail or shake down people. Be happy with your pay.

—Of course “simple” may not be the same as “easy.” But in this case “simple” was about doing the right thing. And John seemed to have cut through the clutter and the confusion, because people kept asking him what else to do. And they began to wonder, Is this the leader we've been looking for.

That kind of leader could find a voice in the chaos of abysmal examples that surrounded the crowds. And it would be easy for John to say “Just keep following me and you will be all right.”

But John is pointing to someone else. And that One walks into sight at the end...after all the baptizing, after all the questions have been answered. It's a moment of change signified by the sky opening up and God's love pouring out on Jesus.

In that moment confusion becomes clarity, wandering in the wild becomes a journey home, the people who had endured chaos become seekers of order and harmony.

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What now? Return to what you know is right. So simple, so difficult.

Today, in this moment, picking up the pieces of faith and trust may seem impossible. Yet we know the right thing to do. We know to whom we should turn.

It comes back to basics: the basics of forgiveness and reconciliation.

We have a covenant that both binds and assists us in our journey. Some time, some where in our lives, each of us decided to follow Jesus. It may have been a strong, clarion call or a continual

nudge. But there is a reason we are in this place in this moment, a common bond.

The Way of Jesus is the way of generosity and forgiveness and helping one another. It is the way that will save us, and the way that will help rebuild ties with our neighbors. It is in that way that we can start to move into the “what now?” that faces us, as the waters of baptism that swirled around Jesus swirl around us.

In our covenant is a call to do the right thing.

In the Savior we follow is the answer to the question “What now?”