

Called By Name
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
January 10, 2021

Luke 3:15-22

So, how's it going, you brood of vipers? (that's what the Baptist calls the crowd a few verses before this morning's reading) Have you had a good week? Mine has been a train wreck, thanks for asking. Saints alive, it's a good thing to hear this text this morning. Because, if it hasn't been clear to you just yet... we have some serious work to do.

We the people (including me), all the people, those who are angry, those who are enraged, those who are full of fear and loathing, all of us need to hear the voice of the one crying out from the wilderness, "PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD! REPENT! BEAR FRUITS WORTHY OF REPENTANCE!"

We the people, all of us, must repent.

I think we hear the word repent and think of the wrongs we have done to God and to our neighbor. I need to regularly confess my sin and say I am sorry, because it's a good thing to not carry it, to get it all off my chest, to know I'm forgiven.

So I make a laundry list to check off. I was short tempered towards my child after I got off that frustrating conference call... I'm sorry God. I told a comfortable half-truth to my friend instead of the whole truth that he needed to hear... I'm sorry God.

Sometimes what we think counts as repentance is just too small. To repent is not saying you are sorry and then going about life as usual, without any change. The word of God did not come to John the Baptist in the wilderness to preach about little petty, personal sins. That's just too small.

The core meaning of repent is to turn around, to do a 180 degree turn. It is a spiritual, mental and physical transformation. And we believers in Jesus Christ, baptized children of God, created in God's own image, we the people, must repent. We must turn around, before all is lost and the tree of good fruit is cut down to the ground. How do we do that?

As beloved children of God we cannot run from the conflicts around us. One of the reasons we find our nation and ourselves in this place of death and destruction is our tendency to avoid conflict with anyone who we disagree

with. Our list of friends has shrunk because we no longer know how to have conversations with other people about difficult stuff.

Am I right? Friends are blocked on social media. Certain family members are avoided. We surround ourselves exclusively with like-minded folks and our vision gets narrower and narrower until we only see own point of view and those who agree with us.

This is not the way of Jesus, the Holy Spirit or of God.

The hard work of repentance involves opening our eyes to those who differ from us. It is seeing the one who has no coat, no food, no shelter and sharing with them, not just giving them things but also hearing their side, their story, actively listening, truly seeing them for the first time.

It is in working alongside those who have directly suffered from institutional racism, who have been told that they are less than because of the color of their skin, that their safety and health and welfare and education are not a priority. Repentance is about hearing the frustrations and working with each other towards a better life for all.

We are seeing on the nightly news how it plays out when we do not listen to each other. And friends, as those who follow Christ we must be bold and humble to reach out and extend a hand of peace to those who are angry and dissatisfied. We must work together to make changes for the good of all people if for no other reason than they are God's beloved children too.

There is a huge job ahead, one that involves healing and reconciliation. That process begins here and now, in our hearts. We must hear God's call to each of us to begin making peace in our lives, in our community, in our own homes. We have seen where hate can bring us. Those divisions we see on Capitol Hill are right here in Monroe, and in Shelton, and Trumbull and Newtown, too.

We hear God's call to repent, we need to repent and begin the hard work of healing. It begins by seeing those we do not agree with, those we don't like, as beloved children of God.

This era in history finds our world facing huge, inter-related crises. Symptomatic or one-dimensional approaches have been shown to be ineffectual. The need for inter-disciplinary, collaborative approaches is clear. It's easy to believe that the only resources we have at our disposal are financial, organizational, social, and very human.

This week we are reminded that God is at work in the world, that we are not the only initiators of justice, and that all the good we seek to do is simply a participation in the trajectory of compassion which God is constantly sustaining in the universe.

In order to fulfill our role in this work, we need the power of the Spirit, to guide, sustain and strengthen us, and we need to hear God's voice, God's living word, to affirm and direct us.

In every community, in every life, there is a need for resources that are beyond our human capacity. Maintaining faithful relationships, keeping families strong, resisting the siren call of greed, addiction, immediate gratification and making a contribution to the needy around us, all require more of us than we are capable of giving on our own.

Even as God calls us to live with integrity and wholeness, God enters our world and gives us God's Spirit to help us to do it. Jesus' act of being baptized is the assurance of his commitment to partner with us, and it is the invitation for us to participate in the work of God's reign.

The promise of God's Spirit to empower us, and the gift of God's living word to challenge, guide and strengthen us, assures that we have all the resources we need to participate in God's work. The message of the gospels, which remind us that even the outcasts were able to receive God's Spirit, is a call to embrace all people and to invite everyone to share in God's saving work, and to be empowered by God's Spirit.

God is creator of all. And Jesus was not born for one group of people. The holy Spirit does not choose to dwell in only a select few. Don't you believe any lie that excludes any person from God's grace, love and mercy. We are all created by God, loved by God and chosen by God. The spirit of God is in every person, in every breath.

So in this year of 2021, hear the word of the Lord, the call of the Holy Spirit to repent, to turn from division towards unity, from anger to mercy, from hate to love.

Let us repent, and turn from the divisive, violent lies we have believed. Name them and let them go. Let us open our eyes to the hurt, harm and death that we are dealing to each other. Let us awaken to all that has come between us and let us turn back towards each other.

Love one another, listen to one another, forgive one another, care for one another. For God's sake, Beloved, remember who (and whose) you are. Amen.