

How Much is Enough?
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Isaiah 12:2-6, Luke 3:1-14

A long time ago in a Galilee far, far away....

I think some of you got the nerdy reference. The opening lines of the 3rd chapter of Luke's gospel sound like the opening crawl of the Star War movie franchise!

Of course, we know that the opening crawl is an effort by Director George Lucas to root the story in some kind of grand narrative, a history if you will, even if it's just one of his own creating.

I remember sitting in a movie theater as a kid experiencing those opening moments, accompanied by the heroic music of composer John Williams. It transported me to a place and time that I could almost feel: where the Republic is battling the Empire, where Luke Skywalker faces his own demons and comes to learn that, yes, Darth Vader is his father.

By the time I became an adult, Luke's twin sister Leia Organa became a General leading the resistance. What is amazing is that from the time I first saw Carrie Fisher in that role, I wanted to BE Princess Leia. All these years later, I want to be General Organa, minus the warring violence.

I can almost believe that Star Wars was something that really happened because I was so easily transported to that time long ago, to that place far, far away...

That's what Luke the gospel writer is doing for us today. Brace yourself (he says): John the Baptist is coming! His opening crawl tells us the where and when. We learn it all happened in the Middle East, when all those bigwigs like Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, and Phillip, were doing their thing.

This John the Baptist fellow, he's a nobody. He doesn't make it into the annals of Roman history. Tacitus didn't write about John the Baptist. Neither did Herodotus. He didn't register on their radar, yet here we are, over 2000 years after his ministry, dedicating a Sunday in Advent to his message.

And as it turns out, his message is pretty straight forward: Get ready. God is coming to make a home among us.

Today, we may wonder where God shows up in our world. We hear in the news day about a global refugee crisis, and the leaders around the world who refuse to confront the humanity of it all in ways that make an actual, concrete difference.

In our own lives, we have friends and family who are desperately sick, or grieving a painful loss.

The pandemic has taught us that pretty much everything is fleeting.

Our inter-personal relationships are fraught with frustration and estrangement.

"How long, O Lord? How long will we, your people long for your comfort?"

We pray during this season of Advent, *"Come, Lord Jesus,"* and we look with great anticipation toward Christmas, but around us still are the signs of brokenness and grief. Yes... Come, Lord, Jesus, and come quickly.

Why isn't God beating our guns into pruning shears and our knives into plows?

Why isn't God stopping death in its tracks, so we don't have to suffer the pain of real separation from those we love?

Why, why, why? And when, Lord, will you come and make it better?

The tragedies we endure strike us so hard, perhaps because we know the ways of this world simply aren't aligned with God's good order for creation, yet here we find ourselves.

So we pray, *"Come, Lord Jesus"* but what does that even mean?

Do we mean for the Word of the Lord to break into our lives and transform our existence?

Do we mean for Jesus to really show up and shake us up, opening our eyes to our own brokenness and need for reconciliation?

Prayer isn't a magical incantation that we direct at God in order to control our world. At its core, prayer is a conversation, a pleading. And when we listen, when we hear the Word of the Lord coming back to us, it can be transformative.

We aren't left alone with the brokenness and crippling effects of sin in our world. We have the hope of Emmanuel, of the coming of Christ to walk alongside us and give us the tools to heal the world.

We aren't alone because we have each other as the church, the body of Christ here and now, who can and do pray and act on those prayers, holding each other to account, comforting one another when all seems lost. Encouraging each other when we fall into complacency.

And we have Christ himself, even now, among us.

It matters because God loves us, and we have the peace of knowing that despite everything that might suggest otherwise, we can rest in the hope of God's promise.

Each and every day, we awaken to a new hope that looks forward at how Christ comes again into our story, in, with, and through each other, in the most unexpected ways.

We still ask the same question that the crowds asked John way back when... What, then are we to do? Repentance takes shape in the specific. John gives specific answers to their question, and his answers involve both what we should not do, as well as what we should do.

The answers are tailored to our specific vocation in life. Take the example of the tax collectors and the soldiers: both of those are positions involve holding some power over others. John basically tells them: Do not use your position, do not abuse your power, in order to serve your own selfish interest. Tax collectors: don't line your pockets by charging too much. Soldiers: don't use your power to get things for yourselves.

So what does this mean for you and me? Well, where do you use your power and authority? What is your role in the home, or the community? Whatever it is, do your work honestly, and don't take advantage of your position to serve yourself. The specifics of that will vary from person to person.

But repentance is not just avoiding the negative. It is also doing the positive, acting in love toward the neighbor. What are the needs that your neighbor has? It may not be a tunic. But it could be a visit, if the person is homebound. It could be a meal, if the person has been sick or is swamped all kinds of burdens. What you share could be friendship, if the person is lonely. How can we, as God's children, share the love and the mercy, the kindness and the compassion, that has been shown to us?

Repentance is making changes in how we live, seeking to do better, to better reflect our character and our standing as God's beloved children. The changes we make as we work towards our repentance will always be partial and imperfect, but we take joy in believing that God's forgiveness is whole and complete.

One of the chief ways through which we can witness to God's coming kingdom is to live like it's already here, and like we think it actually matters.

What would it look like if we went out from church seeking opportunities to be honest and kind, because we've heard that extraordinary acts of grace are within the reach of ordinary people. What if we believed – and acted on the belief – that being honest and kind in a culture that is impatient, immature, and fearful really makes a difference?

I think what would happen is that we would not only have a demonstrably better world but also a more vibrant church, one animated by John's conviction that "*all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*"

I know this can seem like small potatoes when the whole world feels like it's falling apart. But I think that's part of John's message – and Jesus' witness – that precisely because God has promised to redeem all creation in due time, we are free – here and now – to tend to the little corner of the world in which we find ourselves.

It's Advent, and once again John the Baptist is calling us to repentance. Let's take that call seriously and specifically. And at the same time, let us also hear John preaching the good news, proclaiming the forgiveness of sins that comes in the person of Jesus Christ.

We pray for the day when what we hold fast to is finally experienced by all... the salvation, the healing, the new hope... a coming of Christ, when everything that falls short of God's vision for us and all creation is straightened out, leveled, filled in.

We look for that coming day and pray it comes quickly. "Come, Lord Jesus" Amen.