

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: December 12, 2021, Yr. C Advent 3

Text: Luke 3:1-18 (combines the readings from Advent 2 and 3 in the RCL)

Title: A Home for All

Focus: How do we respond to John's call to "bear fruit" and to straighten paths and crooked places and make rough places smooth and create a home where all may be welcomed to the table.

Luke 3:1-18: The Proclamation of John the Baptist

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

I Was an Outsider in Johnson City, TN

Do you remember the last time you were “new” in a particular place? New school, new work, new setting of some other kind. Maybe it was the last time you moved to a new community. Maybe it was a move to the Reno-Sparks area.

A couple weeks ago, when I told you about the Grandma T’s Dill Dip and the Green Bean Lady and Collard Green Greg, I told you about when I moved to Johnson City, Tennessee as a young man. I went there to work full time in a church before going to seminary and I wanted to be in a place that was different from the Southern California culture in which I grew up and had gone to college. I wanted to have the challenge of living in a new place and experience a new culture. I knew that I would be going to seminary after that and at that time could be considering a pastoral call to anywhere in the country. I didn’t want to make that decision at that time without every having lived anywhere other than the Southern California setting in which I had grown up.

I lived and worked there for almost 4 years until I went to seminary. Moving to Johnson City was what I wanted and was ultimately a good experience and I have some lifelong friends from there but adjusting to living there was hard, especially early on.

- I knew no one for 1500 miles.
- I was from California.
- I was an outsider. Where I lived in TN, the way that people know if they can trust you is to know who your daddy is—or better yet, your granddaddy. You belong and you can be trusted or you’re “good people” if they know you back to your granddaddy.
- One time I was complimented by someone who told me I was an “Honorary Volunteer.” He said that because “Volunteer” is the state nickname for Tennessee, the Volunteer State, like Nevada is the Silver State or CA the Golden State. I had probably been there about 3 years and perhaps by that time had built some trust and respect. He meant it as a compliment because he intended to convey that people from TN liked me. But it also reinforced that I was an outsider—by being an “*Honorary* Volunteer” I of course wasn’t a *real* Volunteer, and while I could be let in or trusted to some degree, I was only let in so much. I had, after all, been there about 3 years, not 3 generations.

What has it been like when you have tried to establish a new home, a new place to belong? Have you been treated cordially, but kept at a distance? Have you been let in, begrudgingly? Have you experienced people actively creating a place for you or drawing you in? What’s it been like for you to find a home or be at home?

Dale and Roberta Moving to Reno:

There’s a couple who moved to Reno in January of this last year (2021). When we at Good Shepherd began worshiping in person, they began attending the 9 a.m. service. Their first Sunday was the last Sunday in April (April 25th). Last week when I told the story of Anna and Ryan coming with their 2 young children, I said I didn’t get the

chance to speak with them for a while after they first visited. I may have been away the first Sunday they attended. We didn't happen to talk at the door after worship. None of that is bad or wrong, it's just the way it was, and it was different from this particular couple.

I received an email from Dale the afternoon of the very same day they attended worship with a fairly extensive self-introduction. He included information about

- where they had lived before
- their involvement in the Lutheran Church there, including some specific leadership roles
- A bit about their two young-adult children
- A summary of their professional work history
- Things like hiking and outdoor recreation that attracted them to Reno
- A few questions about Good Shepherd and some of its ministry programs

As I got to know Dale, I made the observation to him that most people don't send such an extensive self-introduction. Again—that's not to say the approach is good or bad, it's just an observation about a difference in how others provide information. He sort of shrugged it off, figuring that everybody did that. In part, I understood the initiative that he took as a desire to get connected, or, to put it in terms of the season's theme of *Close to Home*, I think it reflected their desire to find a home, a church home. Perhaps they were more assertive because they knew what they wanted—they wanted to find a church home.

Here's Dale describing their impressions of Good Shepherd, which reflects their hope or expectation for finding a place to belong, a new church home:

Insert Dale's video here

- **Part 1 of Dale: his first impressions :35-3:08**
 - :35 with "We had really good first impressions. . ."
 - "Two things made big impressions on me. . . There was an announcement about Eddy House. There was an announcement about Shared Harvest and there was a clothes drive going on—all the announcements were about loving your neighbor. That's the kind of church we want to be a part of."
 - "How committed you all are—in word and deed—to welcoming everybody. I had read your welcome statement online—those are really powerful words."
 - Concluding with "Your service to neighbors and your acceptance and welcome of all--those were two huge things that impressed us."

My own reaction, now, hearing Dale's comments: It's weird hearing Dale say, "You" and "you all." Maybe that's accurate, because as a first-time worshiper, he was viewing us from that observational perspective, and it felt like "You" at the time. But Dale is a part of "us." The pronoun should be "we" now.

What Dale and Roberta was looking for was a church

- **with a focus on loving one's neighbor.**
- **Engaged in intentional welcome. He said, "Your Welcome Statement—those are really powerful words."**

John's Call to Bear Fruit and Create a Home for All

Today's gospel reading from Luke chapter 3 focuses on John's role or task to get people ready for the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in the coming of Jesus. This part of John's story is the counterpart to what we read last week about his father Zechariah's words of hope and promise which laid the foundation for him by describing the role he would have. Now here's the grown-up John living that out.

It's a bold, radical call of John to the crowds that gather to hear him:

- Bear fruit—don't rest on your status as children of Abraham.
- You are to share in the mission summarized by the prophet Isaiah: to straighten paths and crooked places and make rough places smooth.
 - You are to help "Make a home for all."

Interestingly, the people are not put off by it. They respond. They view it as a challenge they want to take on. First the crowd as a whole, then tax-collectors, and then soldiers ask him "What then shall we do?"

John responds with practical directives to seek justice & fairness.

- Share what you have
- Collect what is owed and no more
- Don't use your power to extort or make threats or falsely accuse.

From Sharon about Dr. Coleman from Lakewood High School & Long Beach City College:

Last week, we talked about teachers like Mrs. Vessey or Dr. Coleman and the kind of impact they can have on our lives when they invest themselves in students and speak words of promise and hope like Zechariah's words to John.

Sharon Morse, who is the congregation member who told me about Dr. Coleman, told me that because of unjust community CCRs, Dr. Coleman as an African American was not allowed to buy a home in the community in which he was a teacher.

Sharon experienced discrimination first-hand through a class assignment in her Long Beach Community College "Minority Group Relations" class taught by Dr. Coleman.

One of the projects involved fair housing practices. I partnered with a black guy, and we would go to different neighborhoods trying to rent, typically to no avail.

Then a white couple would go to the same apartments and, “Lo and behold!” there was an opening!

For Dr. Coleman, for other African Americans, for Jews, and for other minorities the postwar suburbs that developed in Southern California and communities across the country, shut them out. They may have been begrudgingly let in a little—“You can teach at Lakewood High, but you can’t live here.” There was not a home for all.

- What practical directive might John give?
 - “Don’t use your economic power to keep others out when they don’t look like you.”

“How Do We Put Faith in Action? Are We Living It Out?” --Dale Responds

When Dale made his initial comments about his impressions about Good Shepherd, I asked him a follow up question to ask him to say more or be specific about what he saw.

- I told him, “A challenge for us—and maybe for any group--is the coherence between what you say and what you do. And for you, the Good Shepherd Welcome Statement sounds like it was lived out.”
- *Insert Part 2 of Dale: responding to “How do we put faith in action or live out what we say?” (3:31-4:07 on original video)*
 - “A month or so after that, we began to see announcements about the Pride Parade. . . Roberta and I joined in the walk.”
 - [During the parade, people would cheer, and I thought. . .] “There goes the church that is ‘walking the walk.’”

As I said last week when we viewed Anna’s video, I don’t want to relay this story so that Good Shepherd folks can pat themselves on the back and offer a self-congratulatory, “Good job.”

In the gospel passage, John tells his Jewish audience to bear fruit worthy of repentance. He tells them not to rest on any special status they think they have as children of Abraham, but to create a place for others by metaphorically making paths straight and smoothing rough places and leveling valleys. Again, to put it in terms of our *Close to Home* Advent theme, it’s taking action that would “create a home for all.”

So, my intent in retelling this story from Dale is that it would be an encouragement to continue to work to put faith into action.

Vera Looking for a Church Home as a Widow.

Vera came to the church when she was looking for a home, too, but in a different way. She and her husband raised 4 children together. Vera was a nurse and worked in a hospital and then with two different physicians in private practice over her career. She came to Good Shepherd following the death of her husband.

At the time she didn't have a church home, but came to Good Shepherd when the pastor who led her husband's memorial service invited her to come to Good Shepherd, where he was the guest preacher one week.

- "The first day that I enter the church, I was greeted with a warm welcome. When my husband passed away, I knew I had to find a church." (6:30 on original video)

She encountered a welcoming place, too, and she responded by continuing to "create a home for others."

- She was a Sunday school preschool and kindergarten teacher
- She volunteered for over 20 years at the Good Shepherd Clothes Closet

Here through video, Vera tells how she continues to care for others despite being physically limited herself and not being able to get out. Vera, at age 91, is an example of how we can create a home for all even when we can't get out ourselves.

- Vera creates sock dolls. Her latest collection is headed for schoolchildren in Greenville, CA, whose school burned down in wildfires that devastated their community.
- **Vera Video Segment 1: Sock Dolls: :44 – 1:29** This story would show how we can "create a home for all" even when we can't get out ourselves.
 - What got me started [on sock dolls] I had been crocheting chemo blankets
 - When the pandemic came along, the cancer place that took the blankets shut down and I wasn't contributing. I thought, 'I have to do something.'
 - Watching TV, because I can't get around too much, and I say YouTube and it said, "How to make a sock doll."
 - Ending with "I can do that."

Vera's Sock Dolls



Video Segment 2: 3:04 - 4:09 "It's just such a joy to make them. A lot of love goes into them. I try to visualize a child getting that and making them happy or comfortable. It blesses my heart.

"Now that I have this task done, I'm waiting for my next task. I believe that it is all him. . . I ask God to keep giving me tasks until I take my last breath. I do want to honor him, and I do want to help the people God does love. That's very important to me--mainly because of all that God has given me, which I could never, ever, ever repay."

Vera is Living Out Her Stewardship

We talk about stewardship being demonstrated through "Time, Talent, Treasure." I've been taught to add "Testimony" to that, which is one's ability to tell one's story--to

be able to talk about how we live a life of generosity. Not in a self-promoting way, but to point to one's gratitude to God.

I asked Vera to talk about her sock dolls--I didn't coach her to say something in particular about stewardship or financial giving or her understanding of stewardship. But this is how she faithfully lives her life, and she expresses herself naturally and joyfully. John says, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." Repentance could be understood as changing one's perspective or how one views things.

Isn't that just what Vera is doing? She views her time and her creative ability as gifts from God and in gratitude to God she will seek to use them to comfort and cheer others. **Thank you, Vera.** There's an example I want to follow. May that be so for all of us at Good Shepherd—to create a home for all by living in joyful response to God.