

## ***The River of Fiery Spirit***

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Second Sunday in Advent, Year C

*Luke 3:7-18*

### Introduction

You slithering escapees from a nest of tiger snakes! Why are you here? Escaping from a raging fire and hoping the cool river water might save you?

I have not heard a less promising way to start a sermon on baptism. But John did and he was popular.

John's teaching is the keynote to Jesus' ministry. Jesus never repudiates but builds on it. So it is crucial we understand it. John stands at the beginning of the Gospel story and makes demands that are always presumed.

And John's first demand: *the hearers must have a beginner' mind.*

## The beginner's mind

This is really what baptism and repentance mean. They mean letting go all our inherited agendas and taking up God's.

Repentance is our action and baptism is the sign, seal and public declaration of God's action for us: in forgiveness and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

God who had called Israel out of Egypt across the Jordan into the land of promise, reversing the past slavery, now calls them to come back to the Jordan and start again.

Why start here with repentance? Well John begins with a word of judgment. The people of God have let go God's agenda.

Under the Herods, under the Temple leadership, under the local leadership of Pharisee and lawyer, and the tutelages of the assassins the society no longer represented what God was about. Like the prophets before him John wanted the people to understand that God was serious about: His agenda of peace and love and justice and further that they were agents of it.

When we think of judgment we tend to think only of final judgment: The End. But the Bible speaks mostly of God's judgment now, in history, in the present.

We can think of it like this. Judgment is about a wake-up call. It brings us up short. It stops us in our tracks, so that we can respond and heed the call to get our act together to be the people of God.

So I cannot emphasise enough starting with the beginner's mind. We have relegated baptism and repentance to the periphery of our Christian imagination. We do so at great risk to ourselves. We leave behind the freshness of being able to hear the word of God, to be able to listen for it. Baptism is a reminder that we begin each day with the beginner's mind: Baptism is the reality of the presence of God.

So how shall I hear the word of God today? What changes will hearing the word of God call me to? What demands will it make on me?

Repentance is the daily turning over of my agenda to God in order to do God's agenda. It is the capacity for change. It is the prerequisite for hearing the word of God and a response to the Word of God.

John then *secondly demands that his hearers jettison all their previous securities.*

## Jettison all previous securities

### Why?

John identifies only one of the reasons but it is enough for us to think about today. They relied on lineal descent from Abraham. That reliance stopped them listening for and hearing the word of God. We noted last week that the word of God came to John, a man who had renounced his priesthood, out in the desert away from all the great ones of the earth.

John rebuked those who dismissed the claim of God on them because of their heritage as descendants of Abraham. The elect are in no favoured position. They are so caught up in the glories of the past that they cannot hear or obey the word of God in the present.

John's proclamation of judgement is on those trapped in past ethnocentric traditions that excluded others from salvation: the poor, the lame, the racially different, women, children, and the disabled.

John's proclamation of judgement is on those who use the tradition to escape the claim of God on them in the way they exercise power, use wealth, and allow greed to devour them.

We are not remote from this. Maybe we do not rely on our Abrahamic connection but we have developed plenty of other securities in which to hide ourselves from the demands of God.

Some of them are theological: so we think that we can hide ourselves in being a progressive or an evangelical, a catholic or a pentecostal. We can cling to denominational labels: Anglican, Roman Catholic, UCA, and Presbyterian. We can cling to prayer books and no prayer books. We can cling to service times. Any thin shred will do for us to hide under.

Other hiding places are manifold: we are too poor, we are not powerful enough, we have a debt, we are getting old, everything is changing, we don't have energy and so it goes on.

These are securities to stop us hearing what God might be saying to us. And John's prophetic witness is against all our securities. Securities trap us in our pasts. They immobilise us. Question: what immobilises us?

*John thirdly demands that we now listen to the new word that comes to us.*

### A new word to be heard

The word begins with a question from the crowd: “What then should we do?” Tax collectors and soldiers repeat the question. These vignettes give us insights into what the word of God requires.

The answer is twofold. It begins with a look at their life together. John’s three answers to the question: “What then should we do?” all demand an end to a life lived on the basis of greed and the accumulation on of material goods.

Look at the answers: to the crowd; share your coats and food with those who have none. Unremarkable. All too easy. Or is it?

To the tax collectors; don’t defraud, don’t collect more than is your share. This seems like a ‘don’t rock the boat’ idea. He does not advocate overthrow of the Romans and their system like any good progressive or zealot would.

And to the soldiers; don’t abuse your position, don’t plunder. Again not terribly radical and certainly not the position of a radical who might have said, ‘Assassinate the emperor’.

So on the surface John's responses may not look very exciting. He does not demand that we go out and slaughter the infidel. He does not demand that we withdraw to the desert in contemplation. He does not demand we attend the temple and its rituals. He does not demand we keep Sabbath, eat only certain foods or keep pure bloodlines.

Instead he demands that we allow our neighbour to make their claim on us. Just like Jesus and Paul. How do we do that?

He demands that we become the moral agents in change. We do not wait for governments or religious leaders to tell us how to change or to bring about change. We are the agents of change of things that are in our control. That is God's word to us. We can give away our cloak, we can stop extortion and power mongering, and the abuse of power that is ours to control. We cannot go on saying, 'They should do something.'

These vignettes tell the new story. God is about justice, mercy, fairness, and it is in our power to be their agents. We have to act in our times. John addressed tax collectors, mercenary soldiers, and the crowds and demanded they make a difference. It had to

begin with them. They were the agents of change. They were the moral agents. And so are we.

Even in a democracy where we have the right to work for change at all levels of our society it must begin with us. We need not wait for “them.”

I said that John had two answers to the question: “What should we do?” *The second is the confession of the coming messiah.*

### The coming Messiah

Are we meant to do all this out of our own resources? History tells us we are not too good at pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Or is there another way? Is there good news that says things have changed?

John points to the one who is coming: The one who will baptise with the river of the fiery spirit. Many people think of the Holy Spirit as an add-on to the faith. But the coming of the Spirit was the promise of God’s new world. The new world is coming in Jesus the Messiah. The central element of that new world is the presence and work of the Spirit.

The person whom Jesus baptises will find herself in a river of fiery spirit. The NT is not about hellfire and damnation, but about a living river of fiery life that never lets up changing, transforming, remaking, remoulding us to be people of God's agenda. The gifts and fruit of the Spirit have this one goal in mind: that we will fulfil God's agenda.

### Conclusion

This is the good news. God has changed everything in Jesus. That is John's message.

So to be caught up in the good news: begin with the beginners mind, jettison all past securities and let the Coming One immerse you the fiery river of Spirit. The new day of justice and peace, of love and mercy will dawn through you. It is only the dawn but the dawn heralds the new day for which we wait.