

3 In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to

be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. 4 This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.

5 Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.

The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.

6 All humanity will see God's salvation.”

7 Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?

8 Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees.

Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.”

10 The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?”

11 He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.”

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?”

13 He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.”

14 Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?”

He answered, “Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

15 The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. 16 John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 The shovel he uses to sift

the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat

into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." 18 With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. 20 He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison.

21 When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."-Common English Bible

Typically we, or at least some of us, find resolve at threshold moments— New Years, Birthdays, season changes— to fix things that seem broken, to change things that seem out of sorts. 12 step meetings get bigger, new exercise regimes or eating plans begin, budgets are set, chore charts are hung, new commitments begun. I implemented a whole new chore system for my household at my birthday, right after my sabbatical last September, for example. I once heard Glennon Doyle suggest that rather than taking the New Year to succumb to media messages that we are not enough as we are, or that we need to fix ourselves or improve ourselves, she commended that we instead accept ourselves. Make that our work for the year— accept ourselves and accept our reality as it is. She offered up the editorial word "Stet" as a focus word for the year— Stet is what you write in response to red ink from an editor to indicate you want to leave your manuscript the way it is.

Now I do not think that acceptance means no change. I think, in fact, acceptance is the key to life giving, God given change. Life is change. Change is inevitable. When we accept reality as it is, we are honest and clear eyed and we are able to ask God for help with dealing with what we have accepted. And often, God's help results in miraculous change.

It may seem that I am thinking very small right now— setting my focus on the tiny sphere of individual human lives. But the fact is that this message scales— We as individuals and we as society have to accept reality and surrender it to God, and let God lead the transformation— that's for us, for our nation, and for our world. More

often we deny, we resist, we repress, we blame, we ignore...we have been doing this for our entire American history when it comes to race relations, for example. And nothing good comes from denial. A failure to deal with our deep national wounds and divisions has yielded so much destruction. And a failure to deal with deep wounds in us, yields destruction too. If we accept the truth of our history and our present, it will birth a humility that turns us towards God, the liberating God who will show us the way forward.

I see in the crowds flocking to John at the Jordan, people desperate for changed hearts and lives. Perhaps it was a threshold moment— a change in seasons, a dawning of a new year. Or maybe it's because life in a small, poor nation under the thumb of the Roman Empire, and all the powers that be hinted at in the time stamp of our reading, perhaps this was profoundly difficult and they were desperate for liberation. Maybe it's because the Jordan was the point of entry to the promised land, where new life began for the Israelites, and they heard in John's message the opportunity to begin anew, to be liberated once again, to reclaim their identity as God's covenant people. Whatever it was, they flocked to him. And asked him to baptize them, to help them start fresh.

You may have felt a bit taken aback by John's initial greeting of these crowds. He questions their sincerity when he calls them children of snakes; he assures them angry judgment is on the way. He demands fruit of changed hearts and lives, not just promises and commitments, but actions. He cautions them away from assuming that any of them have a birthright to God's favor. He uses vivid imagery of an ax poised to chop down unproductive trees. Ouch. This is a hard word. But they don't turn away. They accept that their lives and their world is a mess, and they seek guidance from God through John for how to make it better. They are practicing acceptance and surrender, by bearing this harsh preaching, being submerged in the Jordan, and asking... again and again "What should we do?"

And John has very specific guidance for them. To the crowd he says— if you have two shirts, give one to someone who has none. If you have plenty of food, give some to those who have none. To the tax collectors- even the tax collectors, known and hated for making a living by collecting extra— he tells them to stop, to collect only

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

what they are required to collect. To the soldiers— they may have been Roman centurions, Gentiles even— he instructs them not to cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with their pay. It seems he is inviting everyone to be content with just enough and to live justly with neighbors— this is inflected differently for different people, different adjustments are needed to live into contentment and justice- but it all boils down to loving neighbors, particularly through the pursuit of economic justice.

Producing fruit of contentment and justice is not easy, particularly in the midst of a society that seems ordered on injustice and greed, we can't change our hearts and lives and world on our own steam. The Holy Spirit is God's own self at work in the world and in each of us. This is the fire that burns away what needs to be cleared, that purifies, energizes, inspires; the water that cleanses and refreshes; the wind that stirs things up; the dove that brings peace... I have found that I can only get so far in my efforts to turn my life around on my power alone... when I'm just relying on myself I am more likely to spin in circles than to turn around and move forward... it is hard to overcome selfishness and live generously on my own steam... I get much farther if I am surrendering to and relying on the power of God... the Holy Spirit gifted to me.

John's message is consistent with that of the prophets throughout Israel's history. In fact Luke adopts a prophecy from Isaiah to help interpret John's ministry. But you may note that the Messiah he envisioned, the Messiah he anticipated was not in fact the Messiah that Jesus was. Jesus certainly did and does stand in judgment of our world, but he began his ministry, not by taking over John's baptismal ministry with fire, not with his more powerful Spirit baptism. Wouldn't that have made more sense? Why would the Word made flesh, God in a human body, the one without sin need to turn his life around and submit to baptism? I think what Jesus is doing when he submerges himself in the Jordan river is standing in full solidarity with all of humankind... he is joining his life to all of ours by humbly submitting to this ritual. He is accepting his humanity. Everyone who comes to the waters of baptism sore and sick with the consequences of sin rife in their lives— Jesus steps right into that, joins his life to ours. And it was this act of humble submission that released the Holy Spirit and

invoked a powerful affirmation from God –“You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

Friends, we who have been washed in the waters of Baptism, we who are fed at Christ's table, are one with Christ. We are God's beloved children in whom God finds happiness. This is part of what we need to accept. In Tillich's words, we need to accept that we are accepted. This, I think, is key to unleashing the Spirit of God and opening ourselves to true change in our hearts, our lives, and our world.