

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
"A New Direction"

Scripture: Matthew 3:1-17

Opening Hymn: Christ, when for us you were baptized 183

Closing Hymn: Lord of all power 626

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Choruses: Sing, sing, sing, Awesome God, Jesus name above all names, The River

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January 13, 2019

What would you do if you had one week to live?

One week.

Seven days.

168 hours.

It might be tempting to head out to exotic locations:

New York City, Paris, or Hawaii.

It might be tempting to sign up for exciting experiences:

skydiving, heli-skiing, or racing sportscars

But when you get right down to it

I think most of us would want to spend quality time

With our loved ones.

And we might also get on the phone

To check in with others,

to patch things up where relationships have gone sideways.

Most of us would to leave on good terms.

Most of us would want to set everything right.

PAUSE

I mentioned some time ago that I'm reading through
A local woman's story about losing her son and her husband.
I'm still reading it.

After persisting through all sorts of treatment for her older son's cancer
There came a time when the author knew
it was time to switch gears:
It was time to stop hoping for his cure
and start preparing for his death.

One thing she did was read the book, *Gentle Willow*, to her younger son.

In the story "Gentle Willow's friends notice her bark is lumpy and bumpy
And her leaves are brown and droopy.

Saddened to see her deteriorating,
her friends try everything to make her well,
but she continues to worsen.

The animals sadly realise all they can do for Gentle Willow,
Is give her a special medicine called love,
Tree sap to make her feel stronger,
And herbs to help her feel comfortable."

The author used this story to help her son come to terms
With the death of his older brother
And to help him see how he could
support his brother through those last days.

The next day she took her younger son to the store
So that he could buy a gift for his brother.

But few days later she found her two boys
on their own, in their bedroom.

There they were sitting on the bed with tears in their eyes,
surrounded by cookies crumbs.

The author wasn't allowed in on the conversation.

They were saying goodbye
And were sharing what needed to be shared.ⁱ

What would you do if you had only a week to live?

In today's lesson we meet John the Baptist.

For us he sounds like an American evangelist.

We can hear his southern accent as he accosts his listeners:
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."ⁱⁱ

For us he sounds like a revival-tent preacher.

But for his original listeners,
John looks just like Elijah.

They shared the same wardrobe:
"a garment of hair and a leather belt around [the] waist".ⁱⁱⁱ

And this garb only reinforces his significance.

People knew that old promise in Scripture:
"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you
before that great and dreadful day of the Lord..."^{iv}

John looks like Elijah.
And he speaks a prophetic message.

“John announce[s] that God’s kingdom [is] coming,
the time when God [will] reign unchallenged
and establish perfect justice and peace.

[But] Only those who [are] already submitting
to God’s rule in the present...
[will] be ready for the fullness of God’s reign.”^v

And so John [calls] the people to repent,
To change the direction of their living,
To turn their hearts to the Lord.

John’s message is pretty simple.
He tells that people not to count on their spiritual pedigree
or empty religious observance.

God doesn’t care if they consider themselves good Presbyterians
Or real genetic children of Abraham.
He doesn’t care if they sit in pew each Sunday
Or make it to Temple every day.

God seeks heartfelt obedience.

“Produce fruit” John argues.
Demonstrate your commitment he declares.

If you are really serious about walking in God's ways
Others will see it in your behavior.
You won't be able to hide it.

Now you may find some of the imagery
That John uses as both harsh and threatening.

It is.

Borrowing from everyday agricultural scenes,
John speaks about unproductive orchards being chopped down,
about chaff being separated from the grain,
About everything not useful being tossed in the fire.

John uses harsh and threatening imagery.
And yet we are told that the people flock to him.

Crowds make the trip out into the wilderness
To listen to a man dressed up like Elijah
Who berates them, telling them to shape up.

And they aren't there, just for a side-show.

People are actually being baptised, dipped in water,
a custom normally reserved for Gentiles
Converting to Judaism.

They are demonstrating their heart-felts need for a new beginning;
their willingness to walk in new ways.

Why are the people listening to John?

Why are even hardened religious folk coming to him?

Well I think that despite the words of judgement

There is grace in his message.

John tells the people that they are at the cusp of a new era.

And he tells the people that there is a different way to live.

John tells the people that they are at the cusp of a new era.

And he tells the people that they can live a different way.

How about you?

Do you feel that you are living at a cusp of a new era?

Maybe not.

Probably most of us feel

That in the saga of Christianity

We are living AFTER the main action.

Christ has died. Christ is risen.

And while we believe that Christ will come again,

We think that right now,

Not all that much is happening.

Really?

Is not God alive among us

claiming people as sons and daughters.

Giving old men visions and young men dreams?

Maybe the bigger problem
Is that we can't imagine a way of living differently.

We are overwhelmed with our own lives.
Where it is the challenges of raising kids
Or the daily grind of employment,
Or the difficulties of sickness and age.

We are in a rut.
We can't see beyond our old, tired ways of living.
We can't imagine change.
So we say this isn't for us.

But change isn't impossible.
It just comes down to priorities.

John was telling the people to put living in line with God's purposes
As a first and central priority.
He was calling them to focus on that
And from there, to let everything else fall in place.

Can you imagine such a solitary focus?

Well let's go back to the beginning of this sermon.
What would you do if you had only one week to live?
Most of us would quickly reorganise our week
And rearrange our priorities.

And I bet for most of us
(except that one person who flies down to Las Vegas)
that these changes would be for the better.

I mean if we made those changes,
 And then were suddenly granted a reprieve
 from our death sentence...
 I doubt that there would be any regrets
 For all those changes we made.

PAUSE

John is calling us at the beginning of 2019
 To realign our lives with God's purposes.
 This means making certain things a priority
 And giving other things less importance.

Of course this involves more than us and our own determination.
 John's baptism is a baptism of repentance.
 It is about our desire for something better.

But Jesus' baptism showcases God desire to claim us
 And by the power of the Holy Spirit
 To offer us new life in Christ.

So do you want this baptism?
 Do you need to remind yourself of this baptism?
 Making God a priority this year
 will not be a decision you will regret.

Amen.

ⁱ See Dana Goodman *In the Cleft: Joy comes in the Mourning* 143, 144

ⁱⁱ Matthew 3:2 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ See 2 Kings 1:8 NIV

^{iv} Malachi 4:5 NIV

^v Craig S. Keener "Second Sunday of Advent, Year A; Matthew 3:1-12" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Gospels* 13