

January 17, 2025

Luke 3:1-17, 21-22

In the fifteenth year of the rule of Caesar Tiberius—it was while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; Herod, ruler of Galilee; his brother Philip, ruler of Iturea and Trachonitis; Lysanias, ruler of Abilene; during the Chief-Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—John, Zachariah’s son, out in the desert at the time, received a message from God. He went all through the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of life-change leading to forgiveness of sins, as described in the words of Isaiah the prophet.

Thunder in the desert!

“Prepare God’s arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

Every ditch will be filled in, Every bump smoothed out, The detours straightened out, All the ruts paved over. Everyone will be there to see. The parade of God’s salvation.”

When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to deflect God’s judgment? It’s your life that must change, not your skin. And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as ‘father.’ Being a child of Abraham is neither here nor there—children of Abraham are a dime a dozen. God can make children from stones if he wants. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.”

The crowd asked him, “Then what are we supposed to do?”

“If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.”

Tax men also came to be baptized and said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

He told them, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.”

Soldiers asked him, “And what should we do?”

He told them, “No harassment, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.”

The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder, “Could this John be the Messiah?”

But John intervened: “I’m baptizing you here in the river. The main character in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out.

After all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying, the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

The Twelve Steps and a Transformed Life Introduction

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

Pentecostals: Only one—their hands are already in the air!

Roman Catholics: None—they prefer candles.

Anglicans: Three—one to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

Lutherans: None—Lutherans don't believe in change.

United Church: At least 15—one to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who's bringing the sandwiches and the squares!

In the next few weeks over the season of Epiphany, leading up to Lent, I want to explore how faith and the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous can help us to grow and change and inspire us to live fully. This was the focus of my doctoral thesis which was titled “Aware, Repair, Renew: Preaching Transformation into the Mainline church.”

My thesis looked at how so many people in programs of recovery have experienced real change in their lives, thanks to living and walking through those 12 Steps in community with others. So, I wondered what we who worship “upstairs” could learn from those who meet in church basements. In my research I noticed that there were three words — **aware, repair, renew** — that describe in broad strokes the themes and stages of the Twelve-Step program used by Alcoholics Anonymous. These three stages help transform an individual from a life of active addiction to a life of sobriety and spiritual awakening.

I then began experimenting with including those themes into my preaching, to see if it could help inspire transformation in listeners. I won't get into what I learned about preaching in my doctorate, but I was able to see that those steps are not just for people who have a serious drinking or drugging problem — they can be a benefit to anyone! If you want to read my thesis, most of it is pretty readable. There's the odd boring bit, but a lot of it is about this church. Two books were particularly helpful in helping me to see the strong connection between a life of faith and a life of recovery. They are Richard Rohr's ***Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps***, and ***Grace in Addiction*** by John Z. If you want to go deeper on our journey those two books would be helpful to you.

We (and by ‘we’ I mean you and me, Wall Street Church and the Christian Church as a whole) have a lot to learn from the AA community. This church has had a real heart for

AA and the programs of recovery. We host approximately 12 recovery group meetings here over the course of the week.



AA has its roots in Christianity. Bill Wilson (known as Bill W) and Dr. Bob Smith (known as Dr. Bob) established AA. June 10th, 1935 (exactly 10 years after the founding of the United Church of Canada) is set as the birth date of AA. That was the day that Dr. Bob took his last drink (which was a beer) to help steady his hand before performing surgery! It was a Christian Fellowship called 'The Oxford Group' that helped and influenced Bill W. As Bill W. wrote in 1955 "The early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others *straight from the Oxford Group*". The Twelve

Steps are all found in the scriptures – not in the same word-for-word language—but as concepts and principals laid out particularly by Jesus.

Richard Rohr said: "On the practical level, the Gospel message of Jesus and the Twelve-Step message of Bill W are largely the same".

The heart of what the Twelve Steps are all about and what we as individuals and as the church need to be about is summed up in one word: Transformation.

My sermon title this Sunday is "A Baptism of Life-Change". I borrowed the title from the heading in the scripture reading from the Message Version of the Bible. I love this scripture. John the Baptist was a wild woolly guy, and he gets pretty heated and entertaining! You gotta love John in a *he-would-never-fit-into-society* way, but you still love him and make space for him at the Friday Breakfast, even though he doesn't smell great, and he insists on honey in his coffee and on locusts instead of bacon!

He was odd. I don't think Jesus was odd, but John was. He stuck out — and I love that! God has a place and a calling for everyone — those who fit in smoothly and those who are rough around the edges. So John was odd. And maybe that's why he drew a crowd. Some were coming out to see him because of the entertainment factor! But I think there was more to it than that. The people coming to John wanted change, and they saw someone not afraid to make waves. They wanted change out there.

Can you relate to that? I keep hearing this week (with the Prime Minister resigning) that the people of Canada want change. Life has been hard, and it feels like it's not going to get any easier with the inauguration of the new US President.

I try to understand why there were crowds flocking to John the Baptist, and I suspect that part of it was because they wanted change. They were tired of how life was, tired of the occupation and the taxes. John was someone who didn't seem to be afraid of the Romans or even the Religious Leaders.

So all these people come looking for someone who might spearhead change for them. John certainly has no problem criticizing the Romans or the religious leaders. He criticizes Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother's wife Herodias — and in the end he loses his head for that one. In fact, the Jewish historian Josephus also recounts that Herod had John imprisoned and killed due to "the great influence John had over the people", which might persuade John "to raise a rebellion".

As much as John recognizes the problems "out there" he doesn't just complain and spout off about these people; instead, he turns to those who are coming and looking for change 'out there' and says to the people "You have to change 'in here'." The change that needs to happen is not just them; it's you. People ask him "What should we do?" I don't know what kind of answer they were expecting. Maybe "Organize yourselves and overthrow the government!" But his answer is "*You need to live differently.*" What's *in here* needs to show *out there*. If you have two coats, give one away. The same with food. Live within your means, stop cheating others or even taking that little bit extra. Don't just care about yourself in this crazy world — think about others.

We had new members join the church this morning. Joining the church, as I told them, is not like joining the Yacht Club. Instead of signing up for something and paying membership dues and getting something in return, when you sign up to be part of the church you are saying *I commit to following Jesus in this time and with this group of people we call the church, and this relationship with Jesus and the church is going to change me.* It is signing up for life change, for transformation.

There is an expression that goes: **"God loves you just the way you are. But he loves you too much to leave you the way you are."** Transformation is at the heart of the message of Jesus. The problem is that many Christians have stopped being transformed by the message of the Gospel. We like to think it's not us who needs to change—it's

‘them’. How did Jesus put it? **“You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” (Matt 7:5)** Regardless of how old you are and what you’ve been through, I guarantee you there is a part of you that needs to change, that needs to be set free, that needs to be healed, that needs new life. My hope and prayer is that you will open your eyes and your heart over the coming weeks to see where the Spirit would have you change.

I was remembering a great article I read a while back and I think I’ve shared it before, but it’s worth sharing again because it’s so good.



MOSCOW, Idaho — Longtime church-goer Gert Rizzoli was so devoted to her spot in the pew at Featherside Congregational church that when she passed away last month, her family received permission to create a bronze statue of her and set it in the pew. Now, to the consternation of some church members, her statue is permanently located in the aisle seat she occupied every Sunday for forty years. But fellow church-goers also remember Gert’s stiff response to anyone who tried

to take her place. One man was shooed away by Gert on several occasions when he arrived early and inadvertently took her spot, he says. Now the bronze statue serves as an irritating reminder of the encounter.

“It’s like she’s still there defending her seat,” he says.

Pastor Len Kerralt, who agreed to the odd memorial, looks upon Gert’s frozen smile each Sunday from the pulpit.

“It’s nice to know at least one person is enjoying the sermon,” he quips. But others still mumble about the nuisance.

“What if more people request the same thing?” one woman asks. “Pretty soon the church will be filled with bronze statues!” –LarkNews.com

(That story was actually a spoof from LarkNews.com!) But it pokes at a truth that many of us (particularly in the church) are so unchangeable we might as well be bronze statues in our favourite pew. AA has a term ‘Dry Drunk’ to describe someone who doesn’t drink anymore but hasn’t gone through the work of changing themselves on the

inside – changing the part that turned them into an alcoholic in the first place. They might not drink, but they tend to be angry, irritable, difficult people. There are also Dry Christians —people who come to church but have never been changed on the inside. If your faith isn't changing you into someone who is more Christ-like, there is a problem! I can't tell you what part of you needs to change. But God can.

Now I don't want you to get all upset—I'm not asking you do something so radical as to change where you sit on a Sunday morning! (No way — I'd like to keep my job!) I'm asking you to change your heart. I'm asking you to, in the new few weeks, be open to how God wants to change you.

John the Baptist was an “out there” kind of guy, but he was tuned in to God and people knew it. That's why they came to him. They came for entertainment, but they stayed for the transforming love of God. People came to him because his baptisms were doing something. They were changing lives. It's a Holy Spirit thing. But the Holy Spirit or God's incredible love and spirit never ever force their way on a person. How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb? *One* — but it has to want to change. It's the same with God.

So, here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. ...Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. (Romans 12:1-2 The Message)

We were made in the image of God, but the challenges of life have a way of beating that out of us. We develop habits and we cling to things to help us manage and cope with the old hurts and fears. But Jesus wants us not just to cope, but to be free and have an abundant life. This is not just for some. It's for you. If the Son sets you free you, will be free indeed!

Will you join me on this journey this winter?

Thanks be to God! Amen.