

biblestudy: january 2021

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

January 3, 2021 Text: Luke 3:1-18 "John Calls for Repentance"

Changing is often very hard. Sometimes babies cry when a new diaper is going on. I had to re-type this date, because I have been putting 2020 for so long. Or, as simple as this: I eat out a lot and in every regular restaurant I have a favorite that I order without even looking at a menu. "Want your usual?" the wait staff will ask. "Why would I change?"

Maybe the difficulty of change is why John the Baptizer has to get specific when he challenges people to repent. ("Repent" literally means to think and act differently.) For ordinary folks, he says that the evidence of change/repentance would be a willingness to share with those in need (Luke 3:10-11). To the high powered tax collectors, John says "Take no more than your quota" (Luke 3:12-13). That would be tough, because their profit was whatever they could get above and beyond the quota. Soldiers asked what they needed to do to repent. "Don't cheat and stop complaining about your pay" (Luke 3:14). My response might well be: "No, thanks. I'll stick with the fresh berry salad with chicken." Why would I want to change?

In telling this account, Luke is clear about why John was calling people to repentance: Accept the forgiveness that will put you right with God. (That's my paraphrase of Luke 3:7.) John the Baptizer knows that the real evidence of such repentance is in how one lives one's life. "Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives" (Luke

3:8). To fail to do so is to throw your life away (Luke 3:9).

John's message made so much sense that some people thought he must be the Messiah (Luke 3:15). This was a good case of confusing the sign with that toward which the sign points. Near my house is a sign that says "Durham 12," but I know that sign is not the city of Durham; it points the way. John the Baptizer points the way; he is a preparer, an appetizer pointing toward the main course.

Does my life point toward Jesus Christ? Am I behaving in such a way that someone might ask "Why do you do that?" and the answer would be "Because of Jesus Christ." Uh, maybe I had better keep on repenting.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household* (Discipleship Resources) Steven Manskar has written: "Just as faith is the only condition for obtaining justification, works of obedience to the commands of Christ and continued repentance are the conditions for keeping it."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "I begin this new year with a repentant heart and offer this to you..."

January 10, 2021 Text: Luke 7:18-28 "Jesus Announces Good News"

This week's study text has gotten me wandering off into several random thoughts.

In Luke 7:27, Jesus says that in His ministry, there is good news for the poor. We usually think of the poor as those without economic resources. The word being translated is *ptōchōs*, a word that literally means someone who is cringing or bent over (as a beggar might be). Think about it: You may have food in the refrigerator and money in the bank, but you are still bent over with concerns. You are *ptōchōs*. Bent over with worry. Bent over with doubt. Bent over with anxiety. Bent over with loss. And the Word is that the power and presence of Jesus Christ comes as good news to such.

Now, take that thought a little farther down the road. The apostle Paul says that the Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23, Colossians 1:18). In what ways are we, the Church, ministering to the *ptōchōs* among us, in our neighborhood, around our world? How are we bringing good news to such?

John the Baptizer has a limited view of what the Christ would be like. In Luke 3:16. John says that he thinks the Messiah will separate the wheat from the husks and then will burn the husks with fire that cannot be put out. So, when John heard about Jesus who was in works of healing and restoring life, he must have wondered: "Is this the one? It's not what I expected." So, John sends a couple of his followers and instruct

ed them to go and find out about this Jesus (Luke 7:18-19). This is when Jesus told about all the healing and helping He had been doing. He wanted, as we say, to put the *em-phas-is* on the right syl-*la*-ble. (Sorry, I couldn't resist!)

In Luke 3:18, Jesus makes a point that it may be hard for us to hear. What place and privilege do you have? What recognition do you receive from others? What office do you hold in the church? How comfortable are you with our cultural values? Don't put too much stock in all of that; Jesus said the least in the kingdom is better off than any of that.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Gilbert C. Hanke, chief executive of the Commission on United Methodist Men, has written (*Mission Stories from a Reluctant Volunteer, COUMM*): "...we serve a remarkable God who uses damaged folks to do His will in spite of ourselves. I have written this because I am always more complete and closer to God after working in missions than at any other time in my life."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Surprising God, You have shown us in Jesus Christ what our journey is to be like; that makes me a bit nervous. Help me move on this path, knowing that Your grace is sufficient..."

January 17, 2021 Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10, 4:13-18 "Hope Because of Christ"

Nicknames for college athletic teams are fascinating. My undergraduate Alma Mater is Duke University, whose teams are known as Blue Devils. They got that name when the student newspaper bragged on its team that had played like Blue Devils, the name of a World War I fighting force for the French army. My youngest grandson attends Central Michigan University. Their teams are nicknamed Chippewas, to honor the Saginaw Chippewa Native American Tribe (who support the idea). Another grandson graduated from Virginia Tech, yelling all four years for the Hokies. (That name came from a 19th century school yell.) And my other grandson was a Virginia Commonwealth University Ram, shouting from the stands with other "Rowdy Rams."

Devils. Chippewas. Hokies. Rams. We love to give nicknames to our teams. It has got me to wondering: What would be a good nickname for the Church?

How about calling the Church "Hopers"? That's "Hopers"---meaning those who hope. When Paul describes the church in Thessalonica he give thanks for all they have done because of their hope in Jesus Christ

(1 Thessalonians 1:3). The word Paul uses—*ēlpis*—means "to anticipate with confidence." Later, in this week's text, Paul speaks of those who don't have any hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). By way of contrast, for the apostle, hope is a defining characteristic of those who identify themselves with Jesus Christ.

This hope is because we have seen Jesus Christ defeat the deepest enemy, death. Paul is confident that such a victory is for all who have died in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:14). The resurrection of Jesus is the signature on God's contract with believers. In all of life's uncertainties, we can "anticipate with confidence," because, ultimately, Jesus is Lord, even over death.

During the coronavirus, our sports channels did not carry any "live" games, so we had to watch games that had already happened. I watched the 1983 championship game between N.C. State and Houston. With Houston ahead (and with the ball) with only a bit more than two minutes to go, I should have given up on the Wolfpack. But, I knew how that 1983 game had ended. Wittenberg to Charles and bang! State won!

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What Someone Else Has Said:

Jürgen Moltman has written (*The Theology of Hope*, Harper and Row): “Expectation makes life good, for in expectation (we) can accept (our) whole present and find joy not only in its joy, but also in its sorrow...-because in the promises of God (we) can see a future.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God, You reach us with hope...”

hope

January 24, 2021 Text: Romans 8:31-39 “Nothing Can Separate Us from God’s Love in Christ”

We sat around the table and each one was asked to quote a favorite verse of Scripture. I knew immediately what I would say. And three people named it before my turn. Still, I said, “Nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus, our Lord” (Romans 8:38).

Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Rien. Nichts. Chlos. Intet. Tipota. Niente. Kitu. Well, you get the idea. No matter what language you use, it comes out the same.

It is interesting to gather all the words that have been used in various translations to list things that might be thought of as things that could separate us from God: tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, hardship, trouble, harassment, danger, difficulty, anguish, calamity, misfortune, suffering, homelessness, backstabbing, bullying. Most of us can find ourselves on that list somewhere!

Paul does not say that these things do not happen to God’s children. They may happen, but God keeps on loving us through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:38).

For me, there is another simple truth hidden in these powerful verses. In Romans 8:38, Paul says, “I am persuaded...” (King James Version), “I am convinced” (Common English Bible, Revised Standard Version), “I am fully convinced” (Phillips)...that none of these things

or anything else) can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” Convinced. Persuaded. Paul as much as admits that coming to this conclusion is not an easy human conclusion. One has to be convinced or persuaded by the active witness of the Holy Spirit. This trust itself is another gift of the amazingly generous God.

Believing this, I can get to bed tonight with confidence. Believing this, I can get up tomorrow with joy, even on a stormy day. Believing this, I can keep on working out my salvation, assured that even my weakness does not separate me from the seeking love of God.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In one of his sermons, Charles Wesley (*The Sermons of Charles Wesley*, Kenneth G. C. Newport, Oxford University Press) said: “Such joy have all they that hope in God, and the stronger their hope the greater their joy. But this is not all: for hope leads to love, and in the love of God joy is perfected. Very excellent things are spoken of the happiness that flows from loving God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Your love has found me, O God, and now I know that none of the bumps or bruises of life can take that love away. Continue that presence that lets me know I am loved—even though....”

January 31, 2021 Text: Revelation 21:1-8; 22:12-15 “The Outcome of It All”

I don’t know about you, but I get nervous when the assigned Scripture text is from the Book of Revelation. I wonder what the writer John had for supper before the night he dreamed all of this!

It’s not just that God is going to have some far-off heavenly place, but God is also going to have a new earth! When John says “the sea was no more” (Revelation 21:1), he is speaking from an ancient culture that used the sea as a symbol of all that was evil and chaotic. In this new day, there will not be any sin around (Revelation 21:8). The sea will be no more.

How does one get access to this glorious city? Revelation 22:14 says it is those “who have washed their robes.” Huh? (Some scholars think a different phrase is used here in the Greek, so you may have a different translation.) Washed their robes? In Revelation 12:11, it is stated another way: “They have gained the victory (over the accuser) on account of the blood of the Lamb and the word of their witness.” It is what Christ has done for us that gains us entry into the city of God! There is an old Gospel song Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?” It’s a question that rings again in this strange verse in Revelation 22:14.

Written to a people who were under heavy government persecution,

these verses would be a word of hope and encouragement. Today, although some do, most of us do not feel government persecution, but we do experience the persecution of our fears, our doubts, our hesitations, our pain, our losses. So, it is a good word to us too!

In a sense, this week’s text is an invitation. It is an invitation to release your life into the care of Jesus. It is an invitation to let your life even now show signs of the coming kingdom. It is an invitation to live life now knowing that these promises of God are true.

Maybe it is my Southern U.S. roots, but I have this image of our Lord standing at an open door and saying, “Y’all come!”

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his book *Breaking the Code* (Abingdon Press), Bruce M. Metzger has written: “In the Christian doctrine of the last things, the imminence of the end is moral rather than chronological; each successive generation, as far as can be known to the contrary, may be the last generation. In that sense the time is always near. It is therefore the part of wisdom for believers to be ready to meet their Lord.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Lord Jesus! I open myself to the new tomorrow that You will give...”

