

Finding Peace in a VUCA World (III): Resist the Routine

A Sermon by Louise Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

Cleveland Heights Ohio

13 December 2009

Text: Luke 3:7-18

If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? This provocative question bears consideration every day, but particularly in this Advent season as we prepare to receive Christ into our lives and into the world, more fully and more deeply. Can anyone tell, by observing our lives, that we are followers of Jesus, trying to live the way he did, committed to his Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?

Christian faith gets a lot of notice this time of year. Christmas carols fill the air waves as we shop. Nativity scenes appear as the backdrop for advertising, and themes of hope and peace and believing are trumpeted in mall and concert hall. Even the atheists take notice. The American Humanist Association has created signs for billboards and the sides of buses and trains throughout the country that read: "No god? No problem! Be good for goodness' sake." A spokesperson for the group explained, "...it's just to say that you can be good without god so your atheist neighbor down the street shouldn't be vilified as though he is immoral." On the other side, James Dobson's Focus on the Family has organized a "Merry Christmas" campaign, urging Christians to use that greeting and correct store clerks who offer the more interfaith "Happy Holidays."

I wonder. Does saying "Merry Christmas" really provide a compelling witness to the way of life Jesus championed? If the atheists and humanists feel regarded by Christians primarily as villains and immoral, how does that square with Christ's command to "love one another as I have loved you"? We might ask that question regarding poor people and those on the fringes of society. We might ask it about people who have hurt us, and those from whom we are estranged. We might consider our treatment of strangers in our community and in this congregation. *If you and I were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?*

During this Advent season, we've been looking for peace. Peace as God's gift of wholeness and well-being. Peace to counter the violence and selfishness so prevalent in the landscape of our lives. In previous weeks, we've tried to "read the signs" that point to the peaceable kingdom, and we've tried "to prepare" by allowing God to fill our hearts and minds. But there is something more. Today we are called to examine our lives and look for evidence of our faith, to

see if our actions bear correspondence with our words. Today we must face the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of our world, and consider the ways we are responsible for the lack of peace we find there. These are hard words that make us uncomfortable and even defensive. But stay with me here, because within this loud, in-your-face-challenge from God's prophet John the tap root of true peace just may be found. Listen for God's word in the gospel according to Luke, the third chapter at the seventh verse—and join responsively as indicated in the bulletin. We're reading from *The Message*, a contemporary paraphrase by Eugene Peterson.

Louise: When crowds of people came out for baptism because it was the popular thing to do, John exploded: [John Murphy enters and says "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 blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.]

ALL: Then what are we supposed to do?

JOHN: If you have two coats, give one away. Do the same with your food.

ALL: And the tax collectors, what should we do?

JOHN: No more extortion---collect only what is required by law.

ALL: And the soldiers, what should we do?

JOHN: No shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.

LOUISE: The interest of the people by now was building. They were all beginning to wonder:

ALL: Could this John be the Messiah?

JOHN: 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. He's going to clean house---make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned.

LOUISE: There was a lot more of this---words that gave strength to the people, and put heart in them. The Word of the Lord.

ALL: Thanks be to God!

Do you find it difficult-- as I do-- to thank God for this word? There's no getting around the judgmental tone of John's message, with more than a hint of warning, and the clear perspective that things have got to change. No, it's even more pointed than that: "things" may stay the same, it's you and me who have to change. And these are not cosmetic changes: a little moisturizer for the rough places here, some highlights to cover up the gray there. John is talking about a complete make-over.

The biblical word for this sweeping personal change is "repentance," a term that literally means "to go in a different direction." To resist the routine and spurn the status quo. To make a U-turn; to recalibrate one's global position---where you are in the world and on your journey ---according to God's Word. For John this clean sweep is revealed only by the fruit of one's life; that is, in clear evidence through ethical practice. Justice and fairness in the use of material resources and in the treatment of others, a generous and unselfish heart---- these are the outcomes of repentance. And surely they are more crucial benchmarks for Christian faith than a chorus of "Merry Christmases" or a carefully-drawn line between believers and atheists.

The prophet John calls us to examine our lives through the lens of other people, and concern for their well-being. This isn't new news in the Judeo-Christian tradition! From the beginning, the law of faith was to love God and to love one's neighbor. The Old Testament prophets railed against economic injustice and mandated particular concern for the poor, the social outcast, and children. Our actions toward neighbors in need provide the evidence of Christian faith. People who are hungry and hopeless, victims of violence, children without homes or a real chance at life----all of these infinitely precious children of God call us to change the way things are, the way *we* are.

Fortunately, we have help with this, and John's stern message is not without grace. He uses two metaphors to describe the process of repentance—pruning a tree and cleaning house (or as Scripture literally describes it, separating the wheat from the chaff). The ax is laid to the root of the tree: a friend who is a wine connoisseur explained the potency of this image. Grape vine roots -many of which are above ground—have to be cut back every year in order to produce an abundant harvest. The branches of our lives have to be pruned of the deadwood—of selfishness, prejudice, fear, greed for example---in order to "green up" and blossom with good fruit. The cleansing property of fire---to purify metal, to burn up waste, to warm and illumine the dark and cold---frees us from falsehood and hypocrisy to reveal our divine essence. There is judgement here, but it is for our good; it is for our health and salvation.

And notice who wields the ax and ignites the fire, friends. It is our God and Savior. God's way is the best way, and the one that will surely lead to peace; peace in our complex lives as well as peace in the volatile world we inhabit. Our lives are made new not through our own effort, but by the power of God. The first step towards repentance begins with recognition that we can't do it ourselves; the Christian life-style is not one of self-sufficiency. John the Prophet -important as he is in the process—finally cannot produce the changes necessary to make us just and generous and loving. Only God can. And God has come to us and shown us how.

An overheard conversation with a Fairmount member recently startled me with a glimpse of how this actually happens. She was sharing with some others how she has been practicing the prayer I invited us all to offer a few weeks ago: "Jesus, I'm listening. What are you saying to me?" I asked her to elaborate, and here is what she wrote: *Sometimes I do this when I first get up, sometimes on the way into work. It has been a good experience to consciously spend a few minutes with God each morning really trying to hear what God is saying to me. It has helped me focus on having patience and really seeing other people and fully engaging with them and listening to them versus just rushing through conversations and not actually hearing them—especially during this busy time of year.*

She went on to describe an outcome: *I'm fairly certain that God is telling me to go out into the world to share the news of Jesus even though I don't always feel totally equipped, and to truly love and care for others...and that God will provide whatever I need, whether it is the courage, the knowledge, or the resources to move out of my comfort zone.* [I'm grateful to Marilyn Eisele for allowing me to share her story]

Then, as if that weren't enough already, she added, *So I will continue to ask God to speak to me each day and try to really hear what is being said.* Sounds like repentance to me. . . .the repentance that resists routine and remakes the world. Thanks be to God!