First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

12/4/22 - Second Sunday of Advent

Rising Towards God’s Promise

Matthew 3:1-12 (MSG)

**3 1-2**While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

**3**John and his message were authorized by Isaiah’s prophecy:

Thunder in the desert! Prepare for God’s arrival! Make the road smooth and straight! **4-6**John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life. **7-10**When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he 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 make any difference? 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 descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and flourishing? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.

**11-12**“I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I’m a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, 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.”

Normally, I use the New Revised Standard translation when I preach, as it’s the official translation of our denomination. So, when I was preparing for the Tuesday night Bible Study, it really didn’t occur to me to examine different translations of this very familiar text.

When Tuesday rolled around, I read this passage from the New Revised Standard translation, at the beginning of our study as I normally do, in order to set the baseline for our discussion. Then the passage was read from the King James translation, and there weren’t too many differences, a few but not too many. But when we heard these verses read from The Message translation, oh boy, what a difference! I knew right then and there that I needed to use this translation for today’s sermon, because it puts such a different perspective on this well known story.

I’ll be honest, here, and say that while I do appreciate the different perspective that Eugene Peterson brings to scripture, there are times when I think he misses the mark. However, this was not one of those times.

So, today we hear the story of John the Baptist, who was a pretty no nonsense, straight forward kind of guy. He’s been preaching that God’s Kingdom is here, right now, and folks better get ready for it or be put out with the trash. John’s preaching has caught on with folks and they were coming from all over the place to the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized. Now, baptism was not a foreign concept to the people of John’s day, as Jewish theology did, and still does, call for purification rituals, under certain circumstances. John’s actions, then, were not unfamiliar but because of John’s popularity, coming down to the river and getting baptized by the great preacher himself, became the “in” thing to do.

In fact, being baptized by John became so popular, that even some of the Pharisees and Sadducees started showing up. John wasn’t having any of it, knowing that, for the Pharisees and Sadducees, their appearance was really all about show. They were not interested in repentance or making any changes in their lives, all they wanted was to be seen as pious and repentant by the ordinary folks.

John, in his very brusque manner, calls these hypocrites out, and I love how Peterson translates this part of the text; *“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 make any difference? It’s your life that must change, not your skin!”* John goes on to tell everyone present, that the one who comes after him, who we know to be Jesus Christ, will, *“…Ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, 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.”*

Today, we celebrate the second Sunday of Advent; the Sunday where we light the candle of Peace. And it was Peterson’s translation of today’s assigned reading, that helped me make the connection between these words and the concept of peace.

You see, I struggled a bit to find that connection, until I read the words “Ignite the kingdom life within you.” Here’s what I think this particular phrase means.

God’s promise of a new life, as embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, allows us to put everything in its proper place. It gives us the opportunity to take out the trash of old ideas and old thought patterns and old behaviors, which clutter up our lives and prevent us from participating in the act of building up of God’s kingdom here on earth.

Living a kingdom life isn’t about appearances, it’s not something we do for show. Living a kingdom life is about allowing ourselves to be changed from the inside out. And, I’ll take it a bit further here. It’s not just about sitting around and passively waiting to be changed. Being open to being changed from the inside out, is just the first step in the process. Living a kingdom life also requires us to make an effort, it requires us to step out beyond our own selfish wants. A little water on your skin isn’t going to make a difference if you aren’t willing to do the hard work to change thoughts and behaviors that stand in the way of God’s promise.

The new life promised by God, is a life of peace but, while we are indeed a people rising towards God’s promise of peace, we aren’t there yet, are we? Each week in our communal prayer time, we pray for peace in our lives, in our communities and in the world. But, to be honest, it seems like our prayers for peace continue to go unanswered.

We live in a world where peace is in very short supply. Political divisions, racial differences, fights about gender expression, and arguments over equality for all, to name just a few of the things that divide our nation, all seem to be pointing towards the shredding of the very fabric of our society. We retreat into our own echo chambers, where we only hear thoughts and opinions which match our own, all the while refusing to even consider the possibility that another viewpoint may have merit, or be worthy of consideration.

Even in the Church universal, the very body of Christ here on earth, peace seems to be lacking. Right now, our Methodist siblings are experiencing a huge split over the rights of Methodists who identify as LGBT. And, before we Presbyterians get too smug about a painful spilt within another denomination, let me remind you of the many, many splits our own iteration of Christianity has had to deal with over the years, including splits over LGBT rights, whether women have the right to teach and preach, not to mention the proper way to interpret our sacred text.

Do any of these divisions bring us closer to God’s promise of peace? Obviously, the answer to that question is no. So, knowing the answer to that question, what are we doing about it? Do we allow the fire of the kingdom life to be ignited within us, or are the actions we take, the words we speak, the creeds we profess, all simply for show?

As someone who’s spent most of my career attempting to build bridges across theological lines, I’m acutely aware of how difficult it can be to find common ground and mutual respect in that arena. But rising towards God’s promise of peace, compels me to make the effort. It means listening with an open heart and an open mind, while remaining strong in my own faith. It means showing respect for theology and beliefs that I don’t agree with. It means recognizing and acknowledging that there is more that unites us than divides us. And most importantly, it means seeing Christs light in all who profess a belief in the gospel even when that is difficult.

I think, for the most part we, here in Soda Springs, have found a way to do just that. I’m proud to live and serve in a community where this seems to be the norm. However, it begs the question; is it enough? Are we doing everything possible to take that spirit of ecumenicalism and apply it to other areas of our lives?

We’ve all heard the phrase “Faith without works, is dead.” Putting it another way, I believe prayer without action is pointless. Simply praying for peace in our lives, in our communities and in the world, while important, only really works if we’re willing to expend some effort to bring that peace about.

In this season of Advent, as we wait with anticipation for the birth of our Lord, are we willing to let the Holy Spirit ignite the fire of the kingdom life within us? Are we willing to allow ourselves to be changed from the inside out? Are we willing to do the work to continue to rise towards God’s promise?

Folks, your charge today is to keep praying for peace. Let the fire of a kingdom life burn within you and may that fire compel you to put feet to your prayers, so that God’s promise of peace may be finally fulfilled for ourselves, our communities and for the world. AMEN