

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, November 29
Texts: Luke 1:68-75, Luke 3:1-6

A Change of Heart



**First United
Methodist Church**

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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I went to the reception by virtue of officiating at the wedding in the church. I do not remember the venue, the menu, the napkin color, the table decorations, or those with whom I sat. But I do remember that the master of ceremonies at the reception was the stadium announcer for the Chicago Bulls. Back in the glory days at the old Chicago Stadium, the visiting team would be introduced in a subdued voice. And then, the lights would dim, the music would begin to pulsate, a video above midcourt would show a herd of bulls stampeding from the city's "Loop" down Madison Street to the stadium.

The spotlight would shine on the floor in front of the Chicago Bulls bench, and the stadium announcer, with great fanfare, would introduce the home team – first the two forwards, then the center, then one guard, finally, "And now, from North Carolina, Number 23, Michael Jordan!" And the crowd would go wild.

So, here is this announcer at the wedding reception calling into the dining hall the wedding party two-by-two, then the best man and maid of honor, and finally the bride and groom. "Ladies and gentlemen, get on your feet and let's hear it for the bride and groom . . ." as he called out their names to great cheering from the guests.

Now it was time for the invocation, and yes -- "And now, from the Chicago Temple, the Senior Minister, Philip Blackwell!" And the guests applauded and shouted. Now, no one cheers for the invocation, neither before nor after, as was the case afterward that night, as well. But that once-in-a-lifetime-of-ministry moment came back to me this week as I was reading about John the Baptist in Luke Chapter 3. John is in the wilderness surrounded by a crowd, and he is shouting out an introduction of Jesus. "And now, from the tiny town of Nazareth, the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ!" Notice that Jesus is not yet in the spotlight; he still is on the bench. He does not appear in these first six verses of the third chapter of Luke's narrative. But he is about to take center court.

We return for a moment to those earlier verses from the First Chapter of Luke, some of which we just heard read, others that we fashioned into the Call to Worship for the beginning of the service. This constitutes what is called the "Benedictus," Zechariah's blessing given upon the birth and naming of his son, John; John who will be the baptizer, the announcer introducing Jesus.

John's role is brief, but essential. He is the one who proclaims that God is fulfilling the divine promise that a mighty savior is being lifted up from the lineage of David to bring salvation to all, to bring freedom to people so that they may live without fear. "And you, John," says his father, "will be called a prophet from the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins." And what will flow from that forgiveness? "Because of our deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace."

All of Chapter 1 takes place before Jesus is born. Chapter 2 is about Jesus' birth, his circumcision and purification, and the family's return to the north country. Now we are at the beginning of Luke's story in Chapter 3, and Jesus has grown up and now is ready to play the role God has decreed. And we hear John announce, "Get ready to greet him by repenting of your sins" says the New Revised Standard Version, or "by changing your hearts so that you can receive God's forgiveness," in other translations. For when Jesus comes it is a change of heart for those who receive him as a gift from God.

"Quick," cries John, "prepare the way by making the paths straight, fill in every valley, lower every mountain, smooth out the rough places in your lives. Do it so ultimately everyone one will see the glory of God's saving grace."

John the Baptist is the transitional figure from B.C. to A.D., from "before Christ" to "in the year of our Lord." There were no astronomical calendars in those days based on the sun and the moon and the seasons. That did not come for several hundred more years, and that is why pinning down dates in the biblical story is so difficult. There was no year "0." Rather, they told time by who was in power. So, in the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate is governor over Judea and Herod is the ruler over Galilee, when Lysanias is in power, and Annas and Caiaphas are running the temple, God's word of salvation comes to none of them. Not even to one of them, but rather to John, the son of Zechariah, wandering the wilderness near the Jordan River.

Is not that the way of God? Choosing the least likely with no authority to carry the most divine of messages: "Open your hearts to be vulnerable to God's love and you will live without fear." How wonderful and unlikely that sounds to those of us living in a world where a gunman shoots up a Planned Parenthood clinic, where terrorists blow up a concert hall and sidewalk cafes, where one corporation buys out another corporation and puts hundreds of workers out on the streets in order to improve the bottom line, where people still huddle in the corners of Madison at night to stay warm, while the ice melts at both poles . . . to live without fear.

Can we hear John the Baptist calling us to a love that is stronger than hate, to a courage that is greater than fear, to mercy and justice that walk hand in hand? Can we prepare for the one who, living, dying, and living again embodies for us a love that embraces even the unlovable, who stands for justice, who bends for mercy, and who shows us a courage to live unafraid?

That is the Christmas gift that we are offered over and over, year after year, in season and out of season, day in and day out. Yes, it requires a change of heart in order to receive that gift, but the graceful reality is that it is God who

does the changing of our hearts, not we ourselves. Salvation is not something we do for ourselves; it is something God offers to all of us, and we need to prepare ourselves to receive it.

That is hard for many of us to believe, that we are free to receive God's gift of life. So many people are focused on life after death when Jesus, in reality, is the lens through which we are to focus on life before death. So many of us miss out on the richness of our lives here and now because we think too little of ourselves. Oh yes, we live in a culture where people are rewarded for thinking too highly of themselves; some of them are running for President. I always have felt that if you think that you deserve to be the President of the United States you automatically should be disqualified. But many of us, far short of running for President, do not think we deserve much in life because we are not worth much . . . we have not changed the world like we had hoped, we have not achieved the success we had sought, we have not had the satisfaction we desired in our personal lives. We are failures in our own eyes, if we ever dare to tell the truth, though we choose not to bring it up.

John Wesley felt like a failure on that night we Methodists tend to return to, May 24, 1738. John Wesley, the Anglican priest, who had failed miserably as a missionary to the residents in colonial Georgia, especially to the indigenous population. He fled under the cover of night, sneaking through the swamps to find a boat that would take him back to England. He had not served the Church of England well and brought no distinction to himself as a teacher at Lincoln College in Oxford. He had tried so hard to live a disciplined life of faith, getting up at 5 a.m. to pray every day, reading the Bible for hours, visiting the condemned in prison, living in self-imposed poverty, but he could not save himself.

So, when he went to that Bible study on the night of May 24th in a second floor flat on Aldersgate Street in London, he recalls that he went "very unwillingly," not unlike some of us on Sunday morning. He had been to the Evensong service at St. Paul's earlier where the psalm had put into liturgical words his desperation. His heart could not find rest, much like St. Augustine's heart before he became a saint and by finding rest in God. So, again, the words from John Wesley's diary, while he was listening to someone read from Martin Luther's preface to the Book of Romans. It was at about a quarter to nine in the evening, he recalls (who says John Wesley was uptight, looking at the clock to document just when God changed his heart?). "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

He underlined "my," "mine," and "me" not because he was self-absorbed but because he was amazed that God could save him from himself. What he could not do for himself God already had done for him; all Wesley had to do was accept it, the gift of a changed heart. Wesley unknowingly had prepared the way through his struggles, through his tenacity, through submitting himself to the community of faith, the Bible study group, even when he did not feel like it, making the valleys higher and the hills lower and the rough places smoother. And now he was prepared to receive a gift from God, not at Christmas but close to Pentecost, and the frame of reference through which he interpreted life changed. God accepts us even before we accept ourselves. The prodigal returns home after having squandered his inheritance and defiling himself by slopping pigs, and his father runs out to embrace him. The son begins his confession, "Father, I have sinned against you and . . .", and the deliriously happy father says, "Shush for now; we can talk about it later. Now is a time to celebrate; you were lost but now are found, dead but now are very much alive."

One of the greatest stories of conversion from a miserable living death to an exuberant vibrant life is not found in the Bible but in this collection of Christmas books written by Charles Dickens, which includes "A Christmas Carol, being a Ghost Story of Christmas," written in 1843. We may remember it as a lovely, happy tale when Ebenezer Scrooge has a change of heart and helps out Bob Cratchit and the family, and Tiny Tim cries out, "God bless us, every one!" But in reading it carefully we find ourselves drawn into the dark, dangerous, even deadly ways of greed driven by the unholy goal of gain. It is a devastating tale of unbridled avarice, of an economy built on pure selfishness.

A man comes to Scrooge's office on Christmas Eve to ask for a donation for the poor. "What shall I put you down for?" the man asks.

"Nothing!" Scrooge replies.

"You wish to remain anonymous?"

"I wish to be left alone," Scrooge answers. "I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. Send them to prison or the workhouse."

The man tells Scrooge that many people might die without food and drink and a warm place to stay. "Then let them do it and decrease the surplus population."

Marley's ghost is the first to appear, Scrooge's business partner, now dead seven years. He tries to save Scrooge from himself by lamenting his own past. "Why did I walk through crowds of fellow beings with my eyes turned down, and never raised them to that blessed Star which led the Wise Men to a poor abode! Were there no poor homes to which its light would have conducted me!"

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge the fair young girl who loved him when they were young, but he left her behind, she tells him of an idol that displaced her. "What was it?" he asks. "A golden one," she answers.

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows him what is going on right now in the Cratchit home, Bob Cratchit, his clerk in the shop, whom Scrooge had just chastised for taking a full day off on Christmas, instead of a half a day. They are joyful, in spite of Scrooge's meanspiritedness. But then, Scrooge asks the ghost what is hiding under its garment. The ghost pulls back the hem to reveal a poverty stricken boy and girl, cowering, shriveled by hunger.

"Are they yours?" Scrooge asks the ghost. "No, they are yours. This boy is Ignorance; this girl is Want. Beware them both, but especially the boy, for on his brow is written Doom, unless the writing be erased."

"Have they no refuge or resource?" asks Scrooge. And the ghost, turning Scrooge's words on him, says, "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?"

The Ghost of Christmas Future shows Scrooge how little mourning there will be over his death, maybe not even finding enough men to carry the casket.

Scrooge wakes up; it has been a long night of dreams. It is Christmas Day; there still is time to live a new life, to love free of thinking only of himself. And then, we get to the festive end with the dinner at the Cratchits' with the biggest turkey the butcher had left, the boiling pot of bishop, and the loving embraces all around.

A change of heart, it can happen because God can make it happen. We are the ones to prepare the way, even if it means having a few sleepless nights. Salvation is ours to receive, as it is for all people of God's creation. Amen.