

## **The Coming Wholeness: Luke 3:7-18**

Third Sunday in Advent, December 13, 2009

We have chosen on this third Sunday in Advent – called Laerte or “Joy” Sunday – to welcome five new members. This is a joyful occasion and I know that all of you will warmly welcome each of the new members to our church family. I don’t know how many of you who are members of the church remember your own day of joining. For some it was a long time ago. For some, you had no choice in the matter, your parents did it for you. But some may remember that the choice to join a church is a pretty big one. There are a lot of questions that come up. You wonder, for example, what’s going to be expected of you, how much it’s going to cost, and whether you really have to serve on a committee.

There are other questions that come up, though, that are a little harder to get at. There is, for example, the question of what exactly do we believe here at South Church. Although there is a lot of history that informs our answer to the question of what we believe – Biblical history, Christian history, Protestant history, Congregational history, and, yes, South Church history – the question is rarely one that is satisfied by an answer from history. I remember once holding a new member inquiry class. A younger woman asked what we believe and I launched into the classic answers about the bible, God, and the church. She stopped me after a moment and asked again, “Yes, but what do you *believe*?” I got it. She didn’t want to know what the books said. She wanted to know what to expect, what to hope for, what to trust in, what to fight for. She wanted to know what’s right to do, what to live for, and how to die.

Now, that’s kind of a lot for a new member class! I believe I answered saying that this requires a longer conversation. And

that's true. At its simplest and most real our faith is a heart conversation with God that begins: *God, are you there?* And then the questions morph into, *What do you want me to do?* And, *How can I trust you?* To put it simply, the conversation becomes life-long.

The question of trust is an especially gnarly one and it can't be avoided. There's an old story about trusting God that goes this way: *A man stumbles into a deep well and plummets a hundred feet before grasping a spindly root, stopping his fall. His grip grows weaker and weaker, and in his desperation he cries out: "Is anybody up there?" He looks up, and all he can see is a circle of sky. Suddenly, the clouds part and a beam of bright light shines down on him. A deep voice thunders, "I, the Lord, am here. Let go of the root, and I will save you." The man thinks for a moment and then yells, "Is there anybody **else** up there?"*

Trust God? Let go the slim sense of safety we have? The first impulse is to say: *Not on your life!*

You see, when people ask what we believe, usually what they are really asking is, *What can I hang on to? How can I know what's right and good?* Most of all, they are asking, *What can I do with my fear?* And the answer is not what most people want to hear. The faith answer is almost tragicomic; it's just like the joke: *Let go, because you are already safe!*

The very hardest thing to get across about faith is that in all good and necessary things, *we are OK*. God is in charge. God created us, has never abandoned us, and has set the conditions for our rest, our joy and our completion. Our more fundamentalist brothers and sisters are often heard to say that because of sin we wander far from God. A distinguishing feature of our faith here in this

church community is that when we wander far from God out of fear, we sin. Or, to say it differently, we forget our safety in God and therefore try to make little fortresses of our lives. From the making of fortresses come all suspicion, all conflict, all war, all hoarding, all raiding and stealing, all lies, all loyalties to ideas that are less than God and betray our trust in God. Our forgetting begets our “sin.”

The text from Luke’s gospel this morning is almost funny. I say “almost” because it’s also so sad. John the Baptist has people’s full attention. He has called them to repent for the time of judgment is upon them, and folks ask him what they should do. It’s like children doing something they know is against the rules. They can hear a parent coming down the hall, and they say, “Quick, what do we do? How can we make this look good?” They’re afraid of punishment. Truth is, thank God, that it’s the rare parent who really wants to punish their child. A parent wants the child to think twice, make good choices, be safe, grow smarter, realize that in this life there are consequences to their choices. But no parent wants to punish a child by saying the child is not loved and therefore is on his or her own. Do we fear God so much that we assume God does not have our welfare in mind?

Someone is coming, says John, someone greater than he, someone who will separate “the wheat from the chaff.” Again, out of fear we say, *Uh-Oh, Jesus is coming! He’s going to separate the good people from the bad people. We’re in trouble now!!!* But suppose instead, we believed that the Lord comes to separate us from our fears and our grasping at loyalties less than God? Suppose the “chaff” are all the illusions and fantasies that keep us from remembering that we are deeply loved and profoundly OK in God? What a remembering that would be!

Suppose we were to believe that the one who “comes” has actually never left us? Can we then stop projecting our fear and guilt out on to the world and instead follow Jesus where he is going – where there is no need to be afraid? Look at the disciples! They go blundering about, getting it all wrong, failing to see what Jesus is about, asking Jesus to be about *their* business, and letting him down totally. And yet Jesus continues to love them, to lead them, and ultimately he shows them how to die – and therefore how to live.

So we believe we have Jesus with us still.

Here’s another distinguishing characteristic of our faith at this church. The sign that we “get” what Jesus is about and follow his Way, is not that we make it all about Him. Yes, at Christmas time it’s lovely to sing about baby Jesus who comes. Yes, it’s lovely to say Jesus’ prayer and call it The Lord’s Prayer. Yes, it’s lovely call ourselves Christians. But it’s not all about gazing at Jesus. It is about trusting that Jesus is inside us – always has been – and we look out on the world with his eyes. That shifts *everything!* Our work is to let go of everything except what he would have us see. His eyes are our eyes. His prayer is our prayer. His hands are our hands. His beauty is our beauty.

So we believe we have Jesus’ eyes to see with!

That is why we are Open and Affirming. That is why we welcome sinners and righteous of all stripes and colors. That is why we say we are the church where the city takes heart. That is why we worship in different styles, making many paths to God. That is why some people love us and some people hate us, just as they did Jesus.

I would say one more thing to you this morning, long-time members and new members alike. We believe – to paraphrase the gospel of John – that God so loves the world that whoever sees with Jesus’ eyes shall not perish, but have eternal life. And that means that God even today sends us into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world through the One who lives in us. Every generation, like John, looks to a greater power, a greater order, a greater wholeness to come. In our time, in our world, unafraid, unconcerned with loyalties less than God, unapologetically welcoming, unabashedly seeking to live Jesus’ Way, we are the Ones Who Come.

Our prayer is that we may be worthy of Jesus, who believes *in us*.

Amen