

Doing Our Bit (1 of 2)
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
Date: December 9, 2018

Doing Our Bit
Luke 3:3-17

The section of Plymouth that I live in has a wonderful beach called White Horse Beach. One of the best things about the beach is that there is a small but deep stream that empties from a neighboring fresh pond into the ocean. Since the pond is shallow, the water that flows down is warm, far warmer than the ocean. Kids (and adults) walk up the streambank, get in the water and float down to the ocean's edge then hop out, run back, and do it again, over and over. It is great.

This year however, the stream was closed. There was a serious cyanobacteria bloom that made swimming in it harmful, potentially fatal if you swallowed enough water.

It turns out that last winter the storms were so strong that they altered the path of the stream, making it take a long, curving path to the ocean rather than a mostly straight exit. Because of this, the water couldn't flow as fast and the bacteria could build up and create a toxic bloom. The stream was dying, dead, deadly.

Now, this winter, the bridge over the stream (which is partly to mostly responsible for the root of the problem) is closed and being redone. The channel is being rebuilt and the stream path made straight again..... a hoped for solution to the problem. I hope it is a successful one so once again I can float down the stream on a summer day next year.

Today's scripture starts with a similar watery theme. John the Baptist is by the River Jordan baptizing people. He's pretty straightforward and blunt especially when the religious high ups come out to see him.

What he is proclaiming, announcing, in a loud voice is a similar solution to our watery problem in Plymouth.

"Make the paths straight. Fill in the ruts. Take down the bumps. Prepare the way of the Lord. He is coming. Get ready and get your lives in order. Clean it up, folks!"

People flocked to the wilderness to see him--out from the towns and cities into the countryside to see this phenomenon. Now some folks were just there for the show. But others were truly taken with John's message. What did making the path straight mean for each of them in their own complicated lives?

You see, they were converted. They were changed. In John's message they found something so compelling, so real, so true to the Divine, that they wanted to be a part of it and to change, however they needed to follow. Metanoia is the fancy theological word. A change of heart and mind. To turn around and choose a different way.

We read that this happened in the wilderness.
You know a lot of things in the Bible seem to happen in the wilderness.
Burning bushes.
The travails of the exodus.
Exile.
Jesus' temptation.

What is it about wilderness?

Perhaps it is a break from the familiar, away from distractions.

Maybe in the wilderness our hearts are not encouraged to be open, but actually cracked open. I know I have muddled about in the metaphorical wilderness and often only there found God and the new path I was seeking.

Think of the Dickens classic A Christmas Carol which is 175 years old this year. We know Scrooge; he is mean, cold hearted, and spiteful. Over the course of an evening he is taken into the very wilderness of his life, a wilderness, in fact, of his own making. It is that experience of the wilderness that opens him up, takes him far from his comforts, and challenges him down to his soul. A soul that, despite his habit and custom, is still alive and able to be reached. The morning brings a huge change, a transformation, a turning around. Repentance.

Why is this story told year after year after year. Why is it so beloved? "There is something in the story that lures us back to it year after year; we never seem to grow tired of hearing its message. It is a heart-warming story. But more than that, it is a hopeful story. It provides us with the hope that we too can make needed changes in our lives. We can break free from the ruts we have burrowed, and the negative behaviours we have cultivated. (David Owen, weeklylectionaryreflections.org)

We are not lost. And it is in the wilderness that we can more easily be found, be changed.

I imagine many of us feel a bit in the wilderness right now in this moment in time. Political chaos in our country and around the world. Scary statistics on climate change. Gun violence. Tear gas on the border. Wildfires in CA.

What voices do you hear? What voices do we hear? And are we ready, willing, to turn around and start preparing the way?

It can feel overwhelming. But I read a commentator this week who observed her local highway being worked on. The road was old, had some dangerous curves, and needed repair. A colossal inconvenience, she bemoaned. A huge headache. A wilderness of waiting in reduced lanes.

And while sitting in her car in the construction gridlock, late yet again, she reflected on all those it took to change this road. More than 2,000 workers, she learned. Working together to make the path straight and safe for drivers.

And as she thought, she realized that it takes 2,000 people to change a road. No one person can do it alone. Each person has their part to do. Each one has their bit. (reflectionary.org)

The soldiers ask John what they can do.
The tax collectors ask what they can do.
The working poor ask what they can do.

What can we do, each of us, to prepare the way?

It doesn't have to be the whole thing. We can turn around, repent, and change what we are doing ourselves, bit by bit, change by change.

- A little less meat each week to reduce the burden on the food system.
- Some more insulation in our attic to save energy.

- A letter to our legislator to tell them what we want on food stamps in the farm bill.

I had a hard time finding a bulletin cover this week. It seems pictures of John fall into two categories. John baptizing Jesus and John as a martyr after his beheading. Neither fit for this week.

What I wanted was a picture of John that showed the amazing changes he was working in the crowds. A picture, an image, of the people asking how they could be a part of this movement. This metanoia. This change.

It was only later upon reflection that I realized that the picture I sought really wouldn't actually have John in it. John sparked the impulse in people to change. He pointed them to the way of salvation. He gave them hope and direction. And then they went on their way hopefully to start their changed lives.

So really the picture I am after is one of those people, one by one, living changed lives. The best I could do is the picture you see on the cover with John walking away, or perhaps the people walking away, off to lead lives of change, one person at a time, one act of justice at a time, one decision at time, one moment at a time.

This past fall I bought a composter drum. It is a composter on a stand that you turn to speed up the rotting process. It was a step up from my lazy composting-ish pile near the tree line. I learned a bit more about how to compost properly. I trained my family on what to stop putting in the trash. And now at least once a day we are carrying out apple peelings and carrot tops etc., putting them in the composter, adding some leaves, and giving it a turn.

It is more work. It takes time. I now have trash and recycling and compost containers to manage in my tiny kitchen. These days it is a rather cold trip outside. Sometimes I wonder if it is accomplishing anything at all. Then I remind myself that I am healing the earth one bucketful at a time. It is up to me to do my bit. On this and in a thousand other ways. But for that moment, in the turn of the composter barrel, I am repenting of my wasteful ways and choosing another path.

Each of us has a part of the job to do. All are needed, but no one person has the entire job on his or her shoulders.

Preparing the way of the Lord is a big job. I'm part of the team and I'm needed. So are you. We have a job to do, our part of the whole to prepare the way. Let's get to it.

Amen.