

## The Moment to Decide

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

The Second Sunday of Advent, (Dec. 8) 2019

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I wonder why Jesus decided it was time to go to John and be baptized. For most of his thirty years he was in Nazareth. We don't know what he did for sure, but we can make a pretty good guess that he worked as a carpenter with his father, Joseph. What prompted Jesus to untie his carpenter's apron, lift it over his head, put it on the bench, and walk out the door and head toward John way out in the wilderness, way out in the beyond, way out beyond below Jericho and down the Jordan River toward the Dead Sea, where John was preaching?

William Sloane Coffin used to say, "Those furthest from the seats of power are often nearer to the heart of things." And nearer to the heart of God. That was where John was – furthest from the seats of power so he could be nearer to the heart of God. And that's where Jesus was headed.

What prompted Jesus to go at this time and not another time? I don't know. Perhaps Jesus saw the suffering of people and decided it was time to do something. We do know that not long before Jesus' birth the area around Sepphoris and Nazareth was a hotbed for rebellion against Rome. The Romans came in and destroyed Sepphoris, burning it to the ground, killing all the inhabitants and crucifying great numbers on the road between Sepphoris and Nazareth. Sepphoris is located from Nazareth about the same distance as it is from here to the Fair Grounds out on the East Loop. Scholars believe that it is likely that Joseph worked as a carpenter in Sepphoris as the Romans came in after destroying it and rebuilt it

from the ground up as a Roman city. Probably Joseph walked every day from Nazareth to Sepphoris to work and then walked back. Therefore it is likely that as Jesus grew up and worked as an apprentice with his father and brothers, that he too walked the same road. No doubt Jesus was well aware of the stories of the Roman destruction and crucifixions along the same road just a few years before. No doubt there was still talk and resentment and deep grief over what had happened. Did knowing the suffering of his people prompt Jesus to decide the time had come? Maybe he said that with all these people suffering I can't be a carpenter anymore?

I don't know.

Maybe it was all those lessons at the synagogue that Jesus heard? Sabbath after Sabbath for all those years, Jesus heard and absorbed, listened and learned. So maybe Jesus read Scripture and realized the time had come for him to step up? Maybe it was the prayers of his mother Mary as she tended over a hot stove every day? Maybe it was Joseph's prayers as he walked along that road each day with Jesus as they talked? Maybe in his own prayer life, Jesus sensed the stirrings of God touching his own heart and helping him connect the dots of Scripture and the suffering of his people and God's call upon him. I don't know.

We do know that everyone was talking about John preaching way out in the wilderness. People would come back through Nazareth talking. "Have you heard about John preaching and baptizing in the Jordan? I'm telling you that fellow can preach! If you haven't heard him, I urge you to make the journey and hear him. It's worth the trip. That John is something!"

You see John was a Nazarite. A Nazarite was someone who took the vows listed in Numbers 6, the most well known of which was they did not cut their hair. Never. Never, ever cut his beard, either. (He made Steve Chism look like a Republican!) It symbolized their single-minded devotion to God. So John was way down there – out in the wilderness – preaching but the news of his preaching was spreading far and wide. He was a powerful preacher who looked the part of a true biblical prophet – wild, uncut hair, wearing animal skins, eating insects and honey – all because of his devotion to God and to God’s will. All because he lived where he could listen to God and then preach what he heard.

And old John could preach! Everyone was talking about him. Something was afoot. Something is about to happen. John is baptizing hundreds of people everyday. Maybe God is on the move?

Maybe Jesus heard that John was preaching and he decided it was time to make the journey to hear him for himself? I don’t know. It was not a trip one took lightly because it took about a week to walk it.

Luke tells us that Jesus and John were related, probably cousins. In Luke 1, we know that after the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth foretelling them they would have John. Gabriel also visited Mary and foretold the pregnancy and birth of Jesus. And Gabriel told Mary about her relative Elizabeth and for Mary’s first trimester she went to stay with Elizabeth (Luke 1:56).

Did John and Jesus know each other growing up? Had they talked about their extraordinary births and the stories they had been told? Did they talk about God’s work in their lives?

I don't know.

But for one reason or another, Jesus came to a moment of decision. He realized it was time. No more putting it off. No more getting ready. No more thinking about one day, someday in the future. Now was the time. He took off his apron, walked out the door, told his mother goodbye, and turned toward the wilderness and John.

Way out there in the wilderness the people came to hear John. Out there where there were no motels, no restaurants, no grocery stores, no nothing yet the people still came – in droves. Crowds. All kinds of people – Jews, Arabs, Samaritans, and all sorts who normally would not be caught dead being near one another, stood side by side out in the hot sun just to hear John preach. And hearing him preaching God's word, they sort of forgot why they were supposed to hate one another.

A lot of people came out of curiosity. They wanted to see the wild preacher who lived on insects and honey, dressed in animal hair, with the wild, unkempt hair and beard. He was something to see. But after getting out there, his preaching kept them out there. He was riveting. He was clear, concise, and to the point. No beating around the bush. No maybes, perhaps, no doubts, no equivocations. Direct. "I'm telling you, the judge is coming and I'm here to serve the subpoenas."

I heard an old preacher say, "If you build a fire in the pulpit, people will come from miles around to see it burn." Well, that was John – he was setting the

wilderness on fire with his preaching. Indeed, he was setting the whole country on fire.

Some came out of curiosity. Some were drawn to him and his message. And some just came because everyone else was coming. But for whatever reason they came way out in the wilderness to hear this preacher who apparently knew God, and they discovered that instead of meeting John, they met God. Instead of simply hearing a word from John, they were hearing a word from God. And instead of being in the presence of a wild prophet, they were in the presence of God. It was downright scary. Frightening really. “The ax is laid to the root of the tree and every tree that does not bear good fruit is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire! Bear fruit worthy of real change in your lives. This is not simply about changing your clothes. This is about changing your life. Repent. Change. Come and be baptized to show you are changing. I baptize you with water but one is coming who is more powerful than me. Compared to him I am nothing. You had better get ready. He’s coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!”

Sure, John could preach but soon you realized that it wasn’t John’s preaching. It was God. God – what we all want but what we don’t want. It’s scary. It’s hard.

My old teacher Fred Craddock used to say that we convince ourselves that God grades on the curve, but when we come into the presence of God, everything is different. It is not that we become nothing. It’s not that we are shamed. But it is that all of our pretensions, all of our posturing, all of our excuses, all of our convincing ourselves that everything is okay and everything is fine, in God’s presence we see that everything is not okay and everything is not fine.

It's what is sometimes called a moment of truth.

In 1845, poet James Russell Lowell wrote a poem, which became the hymn, "One to Every Man and Nation." He wrote it during the national debate about going to war with Mexico and whether Texas would be admitted to the Union as a slave state. He wrote it because he believed slavery should be abolished forever. One hundred and twenty years later Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted this same hymn again and again. "Once to every one and nation/ comes the moment to decide..." We'll sing this hymn shortly, but part of Lowell's emphasis, and part of Dr. King's emphasis was on "the moment to decide." The moment of truth.

We find ourselves meeting God and we come to the moment to decide. For God or not? For truth or for falsehood? For justice or for injustice? We realize that we cannot go on as usual; we can't be bystanders any longer. The time to decide has come. I'm convinced that somehow Jesus came to the moment to decide and he took his carpenter's apron off and walked out the door toward the wilderness, toward Galilee, toward Jerusalem, toward the Cross. He could have decided differently. Yet, at the same time, when we face God, we can't decide differently. "I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this. Oh, God, I must do this."

Glen Adsett was a missionary in China many years ago. After the Chinese Communist takeover he and his family were under house arrest until one day the soldiers came and said, "You can return to America tomorrow. You can take only 200 pounds with you." Adsett and his family had been in China for years so they started going through all of their stuff, all of their keepsakes. 200 pounds. The family got into arguments over what to take and what to leave. Adsett and his wife

and their two children trying to decide – what about this vase, the books, the typewriter, clothes? They got the scales and weighed everything and finally got it right on the dot – 200 pounds. The next day the soldiers came and said, “Are you ready?” “Yes.” “Only 200 pounds. Did you weigh everything?” “Yes.” “Did you weigh the kids?” “No, we didn’t weigh the kids.” “Weigh the kids.” And in a moment of decision everything else became unimportant.

There are those moments of truth when we see differently. When we are nearer to the heart of things, nearer to the heart of God and we see ourselves and we see our world differently, and we realize that we must make some different choices.

Victoria Barnett, distinguished Holocaust scholar and historian, writes, “During the Holocaust rescuers and resistance members were distinguished not just by their character, but by their vision of a different kind of society and their commitment to that vision.”

John the Baptist’s powerful preaching gave his hearers a vision of a different kind of world – God’s new creation, God’s new way was soon to break in upon them through the coming of the Christ. Then uncompromisingly, he called his hearers to step into this new world. Repent, change, and join up with what God is about to do.

Every Sunday, much of what we hope to do here in worship, is to give you a vision of God’s new creation. God’s new creation does not put children behind cages, and deport families. It does not bless guns and destroy the Earth.

God calls us to another way: to healing and hope, grace and mercy. And God calls us to decide.

I woke up this morning to an email from our friend Wen Stephenson, the journalist and divinity student in Boston who preached here a couple of years ago and wrote the book on our climate emergency, *What We're Fighting For Now is Each Other*. Wen said that last night he was sitting on a railroad track along with many others blocking a freight train carrying coal to the nearby coal-fired power plant. In light of our planetary climate emergency, Wen has decided.

My old teacher, Fred Craddock, who used to pastor a church in Tennessee, tells of a seven-year-old little girl who attended Sunday School and church pretty regularly. Her parents would drive through the circle drive and drop her off and then drive on. Most every Sunday. The parents were on the fast rise to corporate success and no small part were the famous or infamous parties they gave almost every Saturday night. Always inviting the most influential people, especially people who could help them on the ladder of success, these parties were known all over town for their wildness, their debauchery, and decadence – drunkenness, drugs, people sneaking off to rooms together, eventually not sneaking off but being pretty brazen about it.

One Sunday morning, Dr. Craddock looked out and saw the little girl but with her were her parents. At the end of the service, they all came forward committing themselves as disciples of Jesus and wanting to join the church. “What prompted this? Why are you stepping forward?” “Well, we have these parties. You’ve heard about our parties?” “Oh yes, I’ve heard about your parties.” “Well,

last night we had a big one. It got loud and long and pretty wild. And it woke our daughter, who came down and sat down on the third step of the stairway. She saw everyone eating and drinking and spoke up, ‘Heh, can I give the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Amen. Goodnight everybody.’ The party grew quiet and everyone started leaving, ‘My, look how late it is.’ And, ‘We’ve got to go.’ In about two minutes the house was empty.” The Mom and Dad said they were picking up crumpled napkins and cocktail glasses with cigarette butts swimming in them, and got to the kitchen facing each other and said, “What are we doing? Where are we going?”

What about you? What are you doing? Where are you going? Perhaps now is the moment to decide?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.