

Teaching by Kathy Doan
Given at 8th Day Faith Community
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Scripture References:

Luke 3:7-18

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Show me **your** works, and I'll show you **your** faith.

When John the Baptist came out of the wilderness, calling people to repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord he demanded action not pious words of faith. In fact, he made it very clear that one's religious pedigree was of no import now, what mattered was whether one acted in ways that were just and compassionate. And he did not mince his words. "You brood of Vipers who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance," he bellowed at the multitudes who had gathered round to hear him prophesy about one who would baptize people not with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This was not some cute little baby in a manger he was talking about, this was someone who was coming to shake things up but good. You did not want to end up on the wrong end of His winnowing fork.

And the people asked what then shall we do to avoid the same fate as the chaff, which was separated from the wheat and cast into the fire. And now John's tone softens a bit, and he says, well, if you have two shirts and your neighbor doesn't have any, share one of your shirts with him. If you are a tax collector, then collect no more than you are entitled to and don't put the squeeze on people; if you are a soldier don't use your authority to extort people or beat them up and steal their money and be happy with what the government is paying you. On the surface, what he is asking people to do doesn't seem particularly radical, he's not demanding that people give away all of their possessions to the poor, but rather he exhorts them to share out of their abundance. He doesn't tell the tax collector to get another job or the soldier to quit his post and become a pacifist, rather he tells them not to abuse their power.

But what if you are trying to act justly within a system that is inherently unjust. What if you refuse to follow the orders of a superior who is not content with his wages and demands that you join him in beating up and robbing those you are supposed to protect and if you refuse, he threatens your family. What if you

only want to collect the amount of taxes required by law but your boss is demanding a cut of the profits and if you don't collect more then it's coming out of your pocket and you have a family to support. Then John's instructions begin to sound a little more challenging.

The author of the Gospel of Luke is also believed to have authored the book of Acts, and taken together, they tell the story of the spread of Christianity beyond the small Jewish world into which Jesus and his disciples were born, and out into the wider gentile community. One might argue that the author of Luke had no interest in picking a fight with the Roman Empire much less advocating for its overthrow and was in some respects was trying to show, in his portrayal of John the Baptist, that the new Christian religion, like the Jewish faith from which it had sprung, wasn't necessarily incompatible with Roman governance as long as there was no direct challenge to the governing authorities.

And yet a few verses later, John the Baptist does in fact speak truth to power and power, taking the form in this case of King Herod, is not amused, and John, after publicly taking him to task for sleeping with his brother's wife, among his many evil acts, gets himself thrown in jail. It's at this point in the story that John exits stage right and Jesus enters stage left. But we will meet up with John again a bit later when his rock-solid faith has begun to show some fissures.

This advent we have been exploring the theme of exile. Soon after Jesus' birth, he and his parents are forced into exile in Egypt in order to save the life of the child. Thankfully, there was no metering program in place that demanded that the Holy Family take a number on the Roman side of the border and wait months before they were let into Egypt leaving them prey to the murderous gangs who made a living exploiting people stuck at the board. Nor was there a jail cell waiting in Egypt for Mary and baby Jesus and another one for Joseph while the Egyptian authorities split apart the family, subjecting them to months in detention while they decided if they had a legitimate case for asylum. Nope, they were let right in.

Since the election we have been in discussion about what we as individuals and as a community can do to safeguard the lives of all of the families who have been forced into exile in our country, wanting nothing more than to safeguard the lives of their children like Mary and Joseph sought to safeguard the life of their son, Jesus.

Thus, when we think of exile, we are generally referring to a forced exit from the country of one's birth in an effort to seek safety and a better future elsewhere.

But perhaps we might think of exile a little more broadly. The young transwoman who is kicked out of her home by her parents and forced to sleep on the streets, or the young man who is disowned by his parents because he marries a he rather than a she are surely experiencing a kind of exile in which they are forced to re-create a sense of community and belonging outside of the family and community into which they were born while in some ways still longing for the home they were forced to leave behind.

And I dare say that many of us here have felt increasingly estranged from a Christian tradition that is predicated on white supremacy and finds its most recent expression in Christian nationalism.

Now, what may you ask, does any of this have to do with the passage from Luke; well on the surface, perhaps not much but if you dig a little deeper there are connections. First, before we get back to Luke, it bears noting that the Bible is replete with the themes of forced exile. The Jewish people were forever being overtaken by this or that empire, repeatedly forced into exile, all the time sustained by the promise of eventual return. We see these themes echoed in today's passage from Zephaniah.

And yet with exile, despite its many hardships and losses, comes the possibility of something new being birthed, with risks taken, there can be rewards. Free from the constraints of a repressive government or controlling parents or a church that posits that some people are more worthy than others, people can come into their own in ways they never could if they had remained at home. Another overarching them in the Bible is that rarely do good things come from the center, it's always on the margins, in communities or in people who are shunned by others where the truly life-giving stuff happens.

And that get us back to the story of John the Baptist. Jesus and John were cousins and both were miraculous births in their own ways, born to mothers who were shunned or at risk of being shunning by the wider community. Women who knew what it was like to be at odds with the wider society in which they lived. At the time of his birth, John's father, Zechariah, a priest serving in the temple at Jerusalem and his wife, Elizabeth were old, thought to be well past their child bearing years. As a woman who had no children, Elizabeth would have stood apart from the other women in her community, seen as having failed in her principal duty as a woman. One day, when it is his turn to burn incense before the temple altar, Zechariah is visited by the Angel Gabriel who announces that "your prayer

has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

But instead of falling on his knees in praise and thanksgiving for this wondrous miracle, Zachariah questions God’s heavenly messenger, asking, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

¹⁹ You can almost hear a hint of exasperation creeping into his voice as the angel replies, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

Perhaps remaining silent is not a bad position to take when confronted by a miracle that speaks for itself. For what really is there left to say?

Six months later, Gabriel pays a visit to a young woman and give her an even more startling message, that she has been chose to bear the son of God. Mary, not surprisingly, has a few questions and takes a little convincing before she is fully on board. Afterall, bearing a child sans husband was not only an apparent impossibility, but to be a single mother would have opened her to shame and ridicule. However, unlike Zechariah, Gabriel does not reproach her for her initial wariness. Perhaps appreciating that this was a next level situation, where a little more convincing was in order, Gabriel turns to the example of Mary’s kinswoman, Elizabeth, who was now sixth months pregnant as evidence that God can do the seemingly impossible. Mary then agrees to bear the son of God and soon after sets out to visit Elizabeth, where she stays for three months. Two women set part from the wider community by the unique circumstances of the children they were carrying, creating a small community of two for comfort and strength, companions on a strange and wondrous journey.

To me the story of the birth of Jesus becomes a lot more interesting when you drawn the lens out to include the bigger picture, a picture filled with both promise and peril where the path forward was not always be clear.

Even John the Baptist began to have his own doubts as apparently Jesus wasn't living up to his vision for the promised Messiah. While imprisoned in Herod's dungeon, he sends word to Jesus through one of his followers who tells Him "Are you he who is to come or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news preached to them, and blessed is he who takes on offense at me."

John would be dead, his head on a platter, before the final act of the story played out, but Jesus had given him what he needed in the moment to keep the faith and to give him strength for what lay ahead.

As a society we have done our best to drain the power and revolutionary nature out of the story of Jesus' birth by focusing the lens in tightly on that sweet little tableau in the manger – Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus bathed in the warmth of heavenly light. Ostensibly, a sweet little baby, no threat at all to anyone. However, Herod certainly knew better, as the principalities and powers always do, and he ordered the slaughter of all male children under that age of two in an effort to get rid of this perceived threat to his earthly power, the cries of inconsolable mother's cradling their dead children in their arms filling the air. And yet, despite Herod's best efforts to stamp out God's new wonderful work in the world, he failed and the work continued thanks to a pagan people who were willing to shelter a tiny baby and his family, completely ignorant of the role they played in this holy drama.

And it is this more complex story that will serve us better in the days and weeks to come as we hear being played on a seemingly endless loop the great lie that says might makes right, that billions in the bank make you smarter, more capable and better than the rest of us. Where the hypocrisy of those who propret to be followers of Jesus would be laughable if it wasn't so dangerous and destructive.

It will be tempting to retreat from the challenges that lie ahead, and certainly there are times, as both John and Jesus showed us, to take a step back, to spend time in the wilderness to refresh and renew, but neither John or Jesus stayed in the wilderness, they faced empire head on and so must we. But they did not go it alone, each wove around themselves a community of people who helped them to spread the Good news of God's new kingdom. Sometimes the strands of yarn that

bound those communities got pretty frayed, and sometime they broke altogether, but there was always enough yarn remaining to start the weaving anew. But the exact design of the community will change over time, as the old stories come alive for us in new ways while we continue to share the Good news of God's love and contribute our works to the building of God's beloved community where all are truly welcome.