

Telling Your Story – 3. News Worth Sharing: A Life Worth Living

John 9:1-12

February 19, 2023

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February 14, 1880, Valentine's Day, marked one of the happiest days of Theodore Roosevelt's life. He and the woman he had courted for more than a year, Alice Hathaway Lee, had just announced their engagement. After they married in fall 1880, the Roosevelts moved into the home of Theodore's mother in New York City. There they lived the life of wealthy young socialites, going to fancy parties and the opera and traveling to Europe. When Roosevelt was elected to the New York State Assembly in 1881, they moved to the bustling town of Albany. Roosevelt's politician colleagues mocked the rich, Harvard-educated young man as a wanna-be cowboy and they tried to ignore his irritating interest in reforming society.

In the summer of 1883, Alice discovered that she was pregnant, and that fall she moved back to New York City to live with her mother-in-law as she awaited the birth of their child. On February 12, Alice gave birth to their daughter. Roosevelt was at work in Albany and learned the happy news by telegram but also that Alice was only "fairly well." She soon began sliding downhill, suffering from something at the time called "Bright's Disease," an unspecified kidney illness caused by toxins in the environment. Roosevelt rushed back to New York City, but by the time he got there at midnight on February 13, Alice was slipping into a coma. Distraught, he held her until he received word that his mother was dangerously ill downstairs. For more than a week, his mother had been sick with typhoid, also caused by unsanitary living conditions. Roosevelt ran down to her room, where she died shortly after her son got to her bedside. With his mother gone, Roosevelt hurried back to Alice. Only hours later she, too, died. So, on February 14, 1884, again, Valentine's Day, Roosevelt slashed a heavy black X in his diary and wrote "The light has gone out of my life."

Desperate to bury his feelings of grief, he left his baby daughter with his sister and escaped to Dakota Territory, to a ranch in which he had invested the previous year. There he rode horses, roped cattle, and toyed with the idea of spending the rest of his life as a western rancher, a real cowboy. But the brutal winter of 1886, he changed his mind and decided to go back to eastern politics, but this time, no one would be able to make fun of him as a cowboy because it was the era of the independent American cowboy and Roosevelt now had credentials as a westerner. He ran for political office on his western cowboy image and he won. His successes made establishment politicians so nervous they tried to bury him in what was then seen as the graveyard of the vice presidency. But in 1901, when President William McKinley was assassinated, Roosevelt became immediately became president. As president, one of the first things he did was work to clean up the cities and put a stop to the diseases that killed his wife and mother, diseases caused by filth and crowding. It was then that his profoundly personal, tragic story turned out to be one of national significance, one that led to changes for others that meant hope and health. I think this is an incredible story of transformation.

Over the past two weeks, we've considered the importance and the power of our stories. In week one, we were reminded that we are a part of God's story, the greatest story ever told. Pastor Bethany helped us recall that ours is an embodied God who lives, breathes, and moves among us. This is why it is important that we tell and witness to the ways we see God at work. But we'll miss the whole picture if we don't also listen to the stories that others tell about how they have seen God at work in their life. Because when we do this, our hearts softened and opened to see ourselves as one body of Christ - though our life experiences vary. Last week, we looked at the importance and power of telling our whole story, not glossing over the difficult or embarrassing parts. Because by doing this, we can see how through God's grace and mercy, even the greatest of sinners are redeemed. And when we tell our whole story, the good, the bad and the ugly, we make it safe for others to do the same. And so today, we wrap up this series.

Each of us is a beloved child of God and our stories matter because each of our stories is an opportunity for God's work to be seen in us. As United Methodists, we our goal or mission statement is to grow disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. How do we tell the story of Jesus in the way that we live our lives and how can we express that with words and actions? There is someone who needs to hear your story and feel welcome into the story of God. So today, let's begin with a man who has a story to tell.

First, I want you to notice a few facts about this man. Although we never know his name, he apparently was someone known to the people of the community in Jerusalem. He didn't approach Jesus. Nobody brought him to Jesus. He didn't ask to be healed. All his life he had lived in darkness. We are told that he was blind from birth, and he had no idea what it meant to see. (Interesting fact here, this is the only instance in the whole Bible where a person who was born blind was healed by the power of God.) He was a beggar supported by the generosity of other people. As one reads the entire story, it is evident that the man was intelligent. He was a logical thinker, and he was a skilled communicator, but he really had no hope of ever seeing.

Two things happened to him during this chapter. He was healed physically, that's the part of his story that we heard read in our scripture passage, and then, after going through an incredible gauntlet of challenges, interrogations, and accusations by some the religious leaders, Jesus came back and spiritually healed him as well. We'll get to that part of the story in a minute. Let's begin with a brief review.

As he, Jesus, went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

It was a common belief in those days that a tragedy or suffering was the result of some great sin by him or his family. But Jesus used this man's suffering to teach about the faith and glory of God.

He said, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (Some translations say, "so that God's glory could be revealed.) As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Here John is contrasting the concepts of light and darkness, right action and sin, day and night. These themes become a metaphor for the contrast between blindness and sight. The conclusion will be that spiritual blindness is the greater danger. Only Jesus can act in this world to bring sight to that blindness and only those who are willing to accept that they are blind are able to receive sight.

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam." So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

Most likely, Jesus was in a hurry that day. Just prior to this event, in the 8th chapter of John, he had been involved in a major, serious confrontation with the religious leaders. Jesus had made bold claims about himself and about his relationship with God. He had claimed to be one with God. He had claimed to be greater than Abraham. He had said that these religious leaders were sons of the Devil. And so the Pharisees had begun to run and pick up stones so they could stone Jesus to death for blasphemy, and he had escaped from them somehow by slipping away through the crowd.

Jesus probably wasn't exactly relaxed state of mind as he was going out of the temple gate that day. But apparently it was in this context that this fellow, who customarily sat by one of the exits of the Jewish temple, was approached by Jesus. Jesus approached the man. He didn't engage him in prolonged discussion. He did not ask him questions as far as we know. He did not tell the man to follow him and become his disciple. He did not discuss the man's past or his sins. He didn't tell him, like Nicodemus, that he had to be born again. He simply made a little dressing out of damp clay, perhaps following some ancient custom. He applied it to the man's eyes and gave him an assignment. There was something about his words or his manner that convinced this man to do what Jesus told him to do.

And then, Jesus moved on without ever waiting to see the outcome. But later on, we read that Jesus heard about all questions this man had undergone by the outraged, skeptical religious leaders, and came back and sought out this man. He shared with him about who he was, and it led the man to worship Jesus and become a convinced disciple of Christ.

This story is one of many instances where we find Jesus calmly handling seemingly impossible situations. In many situations, we find the disciples almost missing the miracle because they, like we often do ourselves, were stuck on the cause of the problem. They wanted to know what made this man blind? What sins were committed by him or his parents? Jesus tells them, this happened simply so that God's glory could be seen through him. Jesus, as a matter of fact, breaks laws of the Sabbath in making the mud and healing the man, and the Pharisees, also almost miss the miracle because they are so focused on rules, regulations, and traditions that they can't celebrate the miraculous change in this man's life. This is good news that people need to hear. Not only can Jesus forgive our sins and turn our lives around but sometimes in life we just find ourselves in tough places...not because of anything we've done, but because that's just life. Regardless of which one of those cases it is, Jesus shows himself strong and mighty, and able to heal all those situations and turn our stories around. In this story, the blind man was not theologically trained, nor did he have any special skill set. What he had was a story of how Jesus changed him. He acknowledged that he didn't fully understand how it happened but that he was blind and now he had sight. And that's it, the entire explanation of this story.

And so when I read stories like this, and people ask me to share my story, I get frustrated and honestly, a little embarrassed. Because what story do I have to tell? I don't have this incredible story of transformation like the blind man in our scripture story. But if you really read to understand what happens in his story and notice how it is that he explained this moment, he simply said, "I don't know. I was blind. Now I can see." He didn't try to go into the science or mystery of it all. He didn't have to have all the answers. You don't have to have all the answers. I don't have to have all the answers. Because guess what. We will never have all the answers but what we do have is a story, and so that's all that telling your story boils down to. Just tell your story. It doesn't need to be some polished, incredible story of conversion that will knock the socks off anyone who hears it. "I don't know. I was like this before and then I had an encounter over here and now.... I don't know how to explain it except to say, my life is different. My life is better."

Are you familiar with the term "elevator pitch"? An elevator pitch is a brief (think 30-60 seconds!) way of introducing yourself, getting across a key point or two, and making a connection with someone. It's called an elevator pitch because it takes roughly the amount of time you'd spend riding an elevator with someone. Elevator pitches about why your life is better with Jesus are important to have in mind when an opportunity arises to tell your story.? We practice fire drills, lockdowns, and tornado drills at home and at work so that in a blink of an eye, when needed, we know what to do. Our brains have developed a muscle memory of how to respond in those

situations. So it is with your story. When telling your story, you don't have to have all the answers. Just keep it short and share your "why." Here's my elevator pitch: I grew up in a family that went to church. Dad, Mom and all four of us kids. There was never a question on Sunday mornings whether we'd go or not. I've always known about Jesus, heard the stories, read the stories, and sang the songs. But it wasn't until I was in high school, at a youth rally in an amphitheater that faced west over the Pacific Ocean, that I felt the love of Jesus, some would call it the Holy Spirit, for the first time. That was the day I invited Jesus to move from my head to my heart and I understood what a relationship with Jesus felt like. And now all of these years later, in all that I've read, seen and experienced, I believe that Jesus willingly gave his life for me so that my sins could be forgiven and I could have an eternal relationship. And when I read about who Jesus loved and how Jesus loved, who Jesus stood up for, I am inspired to do the same. To me, Jesus is goodness and hope in the face of evil and hatred. When life gets overwhelming and I feel like I can't carry my burdens any longer, like when for almost two decades my brother was addicted to drugs, or my dad's slow, three and a half years decline in health until he died, or those periods of unemployment for Jerry and me, and then two and a half years ago when Jerry was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and we began this uncertain journey for the rest of our lives. When those things happen, I leave them with Jesus and my burden feels a little lighter. I have a renewed sense of hope, hope that tomorrow will be a better day and that the worst thing in life, even death, is never the last. I'm not only hoping for that, but I am also really counting on it. Sharing your God story is the very best way that we have for growing disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Jesus constantly used the power of a simple story to share his profound truths. There is an up-and-coming generation wanting to know: Is this Jesus thing real? If it is, there's got to be evidence in your life and fruit from your faith.

So this week, I invite you to think about your story and write it down. Then find someone you trust and practice telling your story. Perhaps your faith group or Sunday School class will want to take turns over the next few weeks and give folks time to share their story. If you'd like to share your story with me, I'd be so privileged to hear it. And then, when the opportunity presents itself, you'll be ready to share your story.

Just imagine that if we as a faith community began talking our own stories seriously. When we tell our stories, we deepen our understanding of who we are, and the places in our lives we make a conscious decision to open our hearts. It's a gift when we ask others about their story and then really listen to their response and honor their journey, no matter how simple it may seem. Asking and listening is what matters. So, what if we got just a little better at noticing God's handiwork in the mundane moments of our week: our interactions in the checkout line, those little financial decisions, or our conversations in the car with our partners, kids or grandkids? What if we made a commitment to listening to each other's stories and sharing our own, and celebrating those stories? Our church, our community, and the world around us would begin to change from this story of God's love.

Let's pray: Jesus, thank you for my story. I know that you can use every piece of my story for your glory. Today, I pray for an opportunity to share my story. And as I share, I pray for boldness and courage. I trust you with my story and pray for the Holy Spirit to shine your light through me. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 19, 2023

Weekly Prayer

I come before you, O God, seeking what only you can provide. I confess that there are places in my life and in my world longing for life, waiting for your healing touch. Open my heart and mind that you may be at work in me and through my story, in Christ's name. Amen.

Monday, February 20

Scripture: John 9:1-41

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. Jesus' disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him. While it's daytime, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man's eyes. Jesus said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (this word means *sent*). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

The man's neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is," and others said, "No, it's someone who looks like him." But the man said, "Yes, it's me!" So they asked him, "How are you now able to see?" He answered, "The man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, 'Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed, and then I could see." They asked, "Where is this man?" He replied, "I don't know." Then they led the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus made the mud and smeared it on the man's eyes on a Sabbath day. So Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. The man told them, "He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see." Some Pharisees said, "This man isn't from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law." Others said, "How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?" So they were divided. Some of the Pharisees questioned the man who had been born blind again: "What do you have to say about him, since he healed your eyes?" He replied, "He's a prophet."

The Jewish leaders didn't believe the man had been blind and received his sight until they called for his parents. The Jewish leaders asked them, "Is this your son? Are you saying he was born blind? How can he now see?" His parents answered, "We know he is our son. We know he was born blind. But we don't know how he now sees, and we don't know who healed his eyes. Ask him. He's old enough to speak for himself." His parents said this because they feared the Jewish authorities. This is because the Jewish authorities had already decided that whoever confessed Jesus to be the Christ would be expelled from the synagogue. That's why his parents said, "He's old enough. Ask him." Therefore, they called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner." The man answered, "I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know: I was blind and now I see." They questioned him: "What did he do to you? How did he heal your eyes?" He replied, "I already told you, and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" They insulted him: "You are his disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don't know where this man is from." The man answered, "This is incredible! You don't know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God's will. No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. If this man wasn't from God, he couldn't do this." They responded, "You were born completely in sin! How is it that you dare to teach us?" Then they expelled him.

Jesus heard they had expelled the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said, “Do you believe in the Human One?” He answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you.” The man said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshipped Jesus.

Jesus said, “I have come into the world to exercise judgment so that those who don’t see can see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees who were with him heard what he said and asked, “Surely we aren’t blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you wouldn’t have any sin, but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

Observation

John evoked the creation story (Genesis 2:7), as Jesus used mud made from dust to give a blind man sight (verse 6). The story’s deeper meaning was to point to the tragedy of spiritual blindness. Rather than admit anything good about Jesus, the religious leaders scrambled to deny the plain fact that a man born blind could now see! In his beautiful confession of faith in verse 25, the man showed that he could “see” more clearly than the religious leaders.

Application

Jesus repeated his claim to be “the light of the world.” At what age or stage did Christ’s light first shine into your life? What were some of the first things that you remember seeing more clearly in the light of Jesus’ love and grace? What are one or two ways that Christ’s light has helped to clear your sight in the recent days and weeks of your walk with him?

Prayer

Lord, continue your spiritual “eye surgery” in me. Make it ever more true in all parts of my life that “I was blind, but now I see.” Amen.

Tuesday, February 21

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12

Dear friends, let’s love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn’t love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

Observation

As John wrote about the relationships God wants Christians to have with one another, he likely remembered where he and Jesus’ other disciples began. They competed with one another for position and recognition and got angry with each other if one person’s efforts seemed to be gaining the upper hand (Mark 10:35-45). John knew from his own experience that loving others with Jesus’ love doesn’t just spring naturally from warm human feelings. It goes much deeper than just being “nice.” The ultimate source of this kind of active *agape* love is not us at all, but the eternally loving heart of God. The God of the universe loves us, and that is the reason we are committed to sharing our stories, to building community and living with one another in love.

Application

An unknown humorist wrote, “To live above with saints we love—ah, that will be glory! To live below with saints we know—well, that’s another story.” But John said that, in Christ, we need to grow beyond that very human kind of skepticism toward others. Which people, inside or beyond

the church, do you find it hardest to love? Read and pray through this passage, plugging in their names and faces. Ask God to help you live out God's love even toward them. Why did John bother to say, "No one has ever seen God" (verse 12)? He went on to say, "If we love each other, God remains in us." In other words, when we're getting it right, people can see God in us. As your capacity grows to take in God's love, to see yourself as loveable in God's sight, how is this changing the way you see and relate to others?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let the people with whom I come in contact—yes, even the bored store clerk or the annoying neighbor—see you and your love in me. Amen.

Wednesday, February 22, Ash Wednesday

Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:2-10

Remember the long road on which the LORD your God led you during these forty years in the desert so he could humble you, testing you to find out what was in your heart: whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you by making you hungry and then feeding you the manna that neither you nor your ancestors had ever experienced, so he could teach you that people don't live on bread alone. No, they live based on whatever the LORD says. During these forty years, your clothes didn't wear out and your feet didn't swell up. Know then in your heart that the LORD your God has been disciplining you just as a father disciplines his children. Keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him, because the LORD your God is bringing you to a wonderful land, a land with streams of water, springs, and wells that gush up in the valleys and on the hills; a land of wheat and barley, vines, fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and honey; a land where you will eat food without any shortage—you won't lack a thing there—a land where stone is hard as iron and where you will mine copper from the hills. You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the LORD your God in the wonderful land that he's given you.

Observation

We will all have a wilderness story, an experience of attacks, oppression, exclusion, grief, and loss. Some of these experiences may be shocking, embarrassing, or sudden. Revisiting our wilderness experience, from time to time, will keep us mindful and grateful that even in our mistakes, regrets, and sin, we can recall that every experience (good or bad) is part of our story.

Application

Recall a wilderness story of your own that God brought you through. I'm not talking about a hop, skip and a jump down Easy Street, but a recollection about the lonely, scary, uncertain dreadful paths of bankruptcy, unemployment or the heart draining journeys of divorce, death or imprisonment. And once you recall this experience, give thanks to God for bringing you through it. Here's "Desert Song," a musical prayer for this Lenten season (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3l1z7bXY9Y>)7.

Prayer

Loving God, as I begin this Lenten journey, I pray your watchful care over me as I seek to overcome evil by the power and grace of the Spirit. Through my sacrifices of self, make me more like Jesus, in whose name I pray. Amen.

Thursday, February 23

Luke 2:21-52

When eight days had passed, Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived. When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, *A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*

A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel." His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.

Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When he was 12 years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to their custom. After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't know it. Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends. When they didn't find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were shocked. His mother said, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We've been looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father's house?" But they didn't understand what he said to them. Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. His mother cherished every word in her heart. Jesus matured in wisdom and years, and in favor with God and with people.

Observation

Simeon and Anna, elderly servants of God, saw their hopes coming true in the baby Jesus. Simeon saw that Mary's life would hold pain as well as joy. Luke told about how Jesus showed precocious insight into his mission at his first Passover. Mary and Joseph felt the complex dynamics their unique son brought into their lives.

Application

Reflect on Simeon's words in verses 34-35. How did each phrase point to an aspect of Jesus' life and ministry? In what ways has your loyalty to Jesus brought challenges and adjustments in life? Has facing those challenges for Jesus' sake been worth it?

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for Mary and Joseph's courage, commitment, and sensitivity to your will. Shape me into a person committed to reflecting your love in all my relationships. Amen.

Friday, February 24

Scripture: Luke 2:21-52

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Saturday, February 25

Scripture: Luke 3:1-22

In the fifteenth year of the rule of the emperor Tiberius—when Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea and Herod was ruler over Galilee, his brother Philip was ruler over Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was ruler over Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas—God's word came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. John went throughout the region of the Jordan River, calling for people to be baptized to show that they were changing their hearts and lives and wanted God to forgive their sins. This is just as it was written in the scroll of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

A voice crying out in the wilderness:

*“Prepare the way for the Lord;
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley will be filled,
and every mountain and hill will be leveled.*

*The crooked will be made straight
and the rough places made smooth.*

All humanity will see God's salvation.”

Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.” The crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” He answered, “Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He replied, “Collect no more than you are authorized to collect.” Soldiers asked, “What about us? What should we do?” He answered, “Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your pay.”

The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than

me is coming. I'm not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can't be put out." With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people. But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod's brother's wife, and because of all the evil he had done. He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison.

When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Observation

Israel had gone through a long period with no clear prophetic voice. John the Baptist's forceful preaching, calling people to change their hearts and lives, drew crowds hungry for a word from God. He baptized people as a symbol of cleansing and change. But he pointed beyond himself, and Luke said he had the privilege of baptizing the Savior whose way he'd prepared.

Application

John the Baptist showed a sense of urgency as he passionately called people to change their life's direction. To what extent do you feel a sense of urgency in pursuing God's path for your life? What steps help you keep your commitment to God's call strong and focused?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help me to hear your call on my life clearly. Give me the courage and conviction of John the Baptist in living out that calling and doing your will. Amen.