



“SHIFT CHANGE”
SCRIPTURE: LUKE 3: 3-17
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, December 12, 2021 (HYBRID)
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Luke 3:7-18

3:7 John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

3:8 Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

3:9 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

3:11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

3:12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

3:13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

3:14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

"I forgot my phone charger."

That's what Mary Elizabeth says to me as we drive into the city limits of Danville, KY, a few weeks ago for her to visit Centre College, my alma mater.

I'm driving into Danville for the first time in my whole life on earth when my parents do not live there. A year ago they moved to Louisville KY because of the health challenges my mom is having after living in Danville for 55 years.

As we're driving into Danville, I am feeling so many emotions. Dread is prominent. Danville is a complicated place for me. This time it is terrifying. I am not sure how I am going to sleep tonight in a place alone. This is the town I grew up in, and it is town where I was sexually assaulted and stalked for years.

So the phone charger situation is a brief change of scenery for my psyche. I had been thinking about safety, feeling disequilibrium and grief. And now I am thinking about phone chargers.

"No worries," I say. "You can have mine. I will go buy a new one after I drop you off."

So, that's what I do. I drop Mary Elizabeth off and I head to the CVS in downtown Danville. And I solve the phone charger problem very efficiently, if I do say so myself.

I get settled in my air BNB and later get out my new phone charger. That's when I realize that I did not, in fact, purchase a complete phone charger. I had purchased three phone charger cords but no cube.

It's dark outside. It's 9:30pm at night. I can't have a dead phone and Mary Elizabeth not be able to reach me. I have no choice, I've got to go back to CVS. As I walk in the store, a customer walks out with a purchase. Business as usual at the Danville CVS.

I find the phone charger area quickly. After a few minutes of trying to get a package off the hook for purchase, I realize that electronics are locked onto their display hook. I need an employee to assist me.

I walk around the store--every row, every nook and cranny--the bathrooms, the back office. I can't find anyone. I give it a few minutes and then walk around the whole store again-- maybe they were outside for a minute.

"Hello?" I say over the Tom Petty song that is playing in the store.

After about 10 minutes of searching, it sinks in that there is no one working at the Danville CVS.

The store is completely open for business and no one is there. Not a soul. NOBODY!

It takes me a while, but I finally figure out how to get the phone charger cube off it's hook. There are automatic check out areas so I make the purchase without human assistance.

Then I realize the phone charger has one of those sensors in its packaging that is going to make an alarm go off when I leave the store. So I somehow with great muscle strain get it out of that plastic packaging that you can never get into without scissors and knives. I put the packaging on the check out desk, and I leave the store with my phone charger. I drive back to my AirBNB not sure what I am feeling.

A store on autopilot in small town America. Purchases continuing, business transacted without any workers. Hall and Oats, Journey, and Cher songs on loop.

My home town has been hit hard by waves of COVID. Some people I grew up with have lost multiple members of their families to COVID. I can imagine that Danville businesses are having trouble finding workers just like most places are.

I imagine a shift change at that CVS, and the person finishing their shift realizing after a while that their co-worker was not showing up for their shift. And I imagine that that worker had already worked a double shift or maybe even a triple, or maybe they have another job to get to that they can't afford to lose.

So they leave the store, unattended, unstaffed. The shift change hanging in suspension. But people keep going like everything is just fine.

We're programmed to assume that someone is taking care of things, including that someone is taking care of the things that are our collective responsibility.

But what if no one shows up for the shift change.

I wouldn't have chosen this scripture passage for today. "You brood of vipers" isn't the most welcoming language for our first indoor in person worship option since March of 2020.

Today is supposed to be the joy Sunday of Advent--normally the Sunday we hear about Mary and we hear her sing about her surrender to a new world. That's kinda what I was hoping for for today, Grace Covenant. Mary, our sweet sister, welcoming us to a new world.

But the lectionary gives us John the Baptist. He's loud, he's brash, and he pulls no punches. But he's magnetic. You want to be around him, even though you're not sure why sometimes.

John the Baptist is actually like your best friend who you have a love/hate relationship with. You love and admire them, but they also will tell you things you don't want to hear. He's willing to tell you hard truth because he loves you.

John the Baptist is clear--everyone has a way to change--and everyone needs to change. And it must be change that is embodied--lived out in right action, in changed behavior, not just changed minds.

John the Baptist is telling us--the way you are living is causing harm--and you have time to change. The God of love is coming near--and the way we live matters.

"You brood of vipers" was what John says to wake up the pious, not the backsliders--you think you have a pass, you think you're beyond reproach--but there is no credentialing, no virtue signaling that is cover for the radical social change that Jesus is calling us to make.

When I absorbed this message from the passage, that's when I realized this was absolutely the passage Spirit wants us to hear today--in this shift change we are living into right now.

Are we showing up, Grace Covenant, for what God is doing in us and through us, and is it manifesting in what's happening in our city, on our watch, on our shift?

Image #1 240 Encampment

This week, the City of Asheville cleared another encampment of those who are living unhoused in our community. These dispersals happen again and again, even though this community has no coordinated plan for a low-barrier shelter or emergency shelter on Code Purple days--when the temperature gets below freezing.

Image #2 James at encampment

The city's latest dispersal took place after one of the coldest nights we've had yet this winter.

Image #3 Ramada Inn

And in the same week that we got the news that the Ramada Inn shelter plan is not going to be implemented because of funding decisions.

Image #4 Headline about the Ramada Inn

We are struggling to show up as a community, and right now gentrification and development has a foothold. And people are suffering as a result. Listen to our Covenant Partners at Beloved Asheville, Amy and Ponko.

Play Beloved Video

Who is going to show up to make the fruits worthy of our collective repentance match the magnitude of change we must make for this world to not be such a cruel and brutal reality for so many--for all of us.

John the Baptist is talking to the believers--the ones who go to the trouble to get up and go get baptized--the ones who know they were ready for something new--he is talking to people like us--the ones seeking after redemption, seeking after a way for life to make sense, a way for living on this planet to feel better, a way to finally satisfy that aching feeling that things are not as they should be.

John the Baptist tells the believers it's time for them to show up for life in a new way. The shift change is underway and they need to not just be ready, they need to be different.

It's our time to show up, Grace Covenant. In a new way, for a new day.

The muscles we've been stretching and strengthening for years now have prepared us for this shift change.

These are the muscles we have strengthened in our work together to reckon with the cultures that have socialized us our whole lives:

- The cultures of supremacy and dominance and commodification and homophobia,
- The cultures of white ways being right ways and the rule of the fathers and the gender binary and consumption and seeing this planet as ours to extract

These are the collective muscles we've stretched and maybe even maxed out some during COVID of stretching and letting go, of bending and turning and stretching and grieving.

These are the muscles that need to be strong for us to truly love ourselves, love our neighbor, and love God.

Those are all the muscles that God is asking us to use now.

Repentance is turning around--a 180, changing from the inside, out.

The Greek word is metanoia--and it is a change that goes deep--an inner change that changes the way you see things and do things and the way you feel and the way you understand and the way you act.

In our epochal moment in human life on this planet, Grace Covenant, we have been using our energy to repent from white supremacy--we have prioritized the work of deprogramming our psyches, our bodies, our hearts, our communities, our families, our systems, our structures, our beliefs, our self-understanding--repentance is a process of decolonization for us in our moment in human history.

And so if we, Grace Covenant, come upon John the Baptist baptizing believers when we venture out to practice our faith--and we ask him "What then should we do?"

What happens at 789 Merrimon Ave will be tangled up in his answer.

The way we use this building, the way we think about this building, our sense of ownership of this building and this land, our way of moving in and through this building.

And we have been practicing that shift--for a long time--shifting our front lawn to a community garden, transforming our fellowship hall into Room in the Inn for many years, being a pop up shelter during a hurricane for people who could not safely go into other shelters, dedicating space to support quality child care, prioritizing this space being used for the nurture, care, learning, and growth of Black and brown children in the Asheville/Buncombe County schools during a global pandemic. YTL using the space for months when the church was closed for church programs. And now sharing space with YTL in new ways--providing office space for their director, building community together, working in the garden together, solving problems together, dreaming about a new world together. And realizing that we are a church without walls during COVID.

At the same time the Asheville/Buncombe County community is not consistently showing up the way we need to for our siblings and neighbors who are bearing the brunt of gentrification and inflation and this town being a tourist destination. We, this community, are not showing up in the ways we need to for those experiencing homelessness, those in the grip of mental illness, those working multiple jobs and sleeping in their cars with their children, those who have lived here for generations and see another hotel go up without the collective resolve to truly pause and live into the promise of reparations.

Our Session will discern on Tuesday night about our building being a Code Purple shelter. We'll figure it out--I am sure of it. This Session is a faithful and courageous discerning body. But GCPC being a Code Purple shelter is like a person having five coats and letting someone use one for a while, and then asking for it back. Being a Code Purple shelter can ameliorate suffering for a few in real time, yes, but it is not the full fruit worthy of repentance.

That is a longer journey, GCPC, that stretches out ahead of us as we await Jesus' arrival. Who we are in the this community can only be fruit worthy of repentance if this community actually changes, turns around--and becomes a place where all people can thrive, where all people can trust their surroundings, and lay their heads down to rest, and show up for their shift ready to share their gifts and skills freely and be affirmed and appreciated and loved in life-sustaining ways.

When Asheville/Buncombe County changes, we'll know we have changed, too. That's the good news, Grace Covenant. That's the very good news.

Thanks be to God.