

“DON’T JUST STAND THERE!”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 3:7-18, Zephaniah 3:14-20

We are picking up with the story of the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry this week. Two weeks ago, we learned that Jesus told us to, STAND FIRM. Last Sunday, Pastor Mike called us to be REFINED. We are to be changed, shaped, molded and maybe even pruned so that we might best be available to God and for God’s service. Today, we will be focusing on the fact that we can’t just stand there. We are called to action!

As John the Baptist preached along the River Jordan at places where people gathered, people responded by being baptized as a sign of their repentance. Baptism indicated that mountains of arrogance and greed were leveled. And that sins of abuse and hate were covered over identifying that person as having a relationship with God.

My first thought is that John is not using any of the tested techniques that we might find in the book, *“How to Win Friends and Influence People.”* Dude, this crowd came out here to hear your message, don’t run them off or make them mad before you give the invitation!

It seems that John goes straight to the point. He might have said, “you sinful generation” or some other historical prophet phrase to remind the people of their condition. Nope. Instead, he uses a word picture.

I was reminded of an incident as I tried to understand this image. What I remembered was an event in May 2011. The dog was on the back porch of our parsonage and was barking. Usually that means she wants back in. But this bark was different. Something was out there. So I go and investigate. Charlie Girl has cornered a snake in the coils on the back side of an antique glider that I had on the porch. The only way to get the snake out of there was to put me closer to that snake than I was able to be. So I got the broom and I made David go to the end of the porch. I told him that I was going to start beating the glider and making lots of noise with the idea that the snake would run out of there. I told him that his job was to make sure that it went down the hill back into the woods.

So we get all geared up. I have a broom and David has a tennis racket. Don’t ask. I start beating that poor glider and the snake starts to move a couple of inches. So I squeal...ok, I screamed! I turned and looked and David had hopped up on the running boards of his truck and was holding on to the mirror like that snake was going to attack him or something. Now,

remember, the snake had only moved a couple of inches and was so imbedded in the glider, it wasn't coming out easily. I laughed so hard at poor David.

Long story to short...I ended up calling John, a member of our congregation, and the reptile zoo keeper at the Knoxville Zoo to come and get it. He asked me to describe it on the phone. I told him it was probably about 3 feet long, I'm sure it had a diamond head (poisonous). He came with his bare hands and a pillow case. It was about 1 foot long and was a simple little black snake. A baby. I felt a little ridiculous. David denies that anything happened that day. In that moment, we were convinced we were dealing with a brood of vipers!

John has called the crowds that hear about the baptism of repentance as people that are running from destruction. Running from the approaching wrath of God. He tells them to produce fruit with repentance. Basically, real repentance causes change. Real repentance brings something good into the world. We can't just stand there!

Going through the motions doesn't do anything. No one is guaranteed a relationship with God based on the faith of their father or mother or even because of the promise made to Abraham. God can just raise up other children. Most of us understand that our salvation is a personal experience. We don't have to have a family with a God connection to qualify.

In fact, John tells them that the axe is ready to take out trees that are not producing and destroy them. John's message gets a response from the crowd. Most of them would be well aware of the requirements of the law. John is not talking nice to them now. It makes me think that they were just heading down to the river to submit to the next fad. They are looking in the self-help section to learn what some expert says will make them right with God. Then they plan to head home and live life as usual.

John is telling them there has to be a change. The temporary repentance, the special rock in their pocket, the new prayer words don't mean a thing if their daily life is not changed. **DON'T JUST STAND THERE!**

The crowds are convicted. They can feel that something is wrong. They have repented like always and they went down into the water and they are waiting for assuring words like the priest always used...your offering is accepted and God has covered your sins. This prophet leaves them on the hook. What does he want from them so they can feel better?

So they ask, "What should we do then?" John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food, should do the same." John's answer is fairly simple. He doesn't send them out on some difficult quest. The change he asks the crowd of people to step up to is to help the poor. To not be greedy or resist doing the right thing.

It seems that there were some Government contractors in the crowd (tax collectors). They did not receive the simple instruction to share. They were wealthy because of their jobs. It's not clear if they thought themselves to be better than the common folks. It might have been that they felt separated because they were considered unclean. They were working for the Romans and considered to be dishonest.

The scripture says, tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

Wait a second, John does not tell them to repay anyone. When he asked how they should respond, he tells them to only charge what they are supposed to charge. No extra fees or interest or special tax options. Their repentance and baptism set them right with God. Be honest and just do what is right.

Then John speaks to some soldiers that ask the same question. "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay." There is a chance that these were roman soldiers assigned to protect the tax collectors or perhaps just be present for crowd control. John tells them to do their job and to not increase their income by holding people up with threats. Be content with their pay. That seems so simple, perhaps even too easy.

John's call for repentance, genuine repentance opened their eyes to a knowledge that something specific was wrong in their lives.

Over at the temple, the priest insisted that they had to bring an offering of the highest quality. The priest processed the offering, said some magic words and sent them on their way. It is very likely that after each trip to the temple, people went home unchanged. They went through the motions required by the Law of Moses and went back to life and were unchanged by the forgiveness ritual. Back to the same environment, same job, the same set of activities and choices. Then next month, or next year, they were back at the temple making the offering like they were supposed to do and the cycle starts again.

John's message starts with identification that the people are snakes looking for a way of avoiding destruction. Like real snakes, they can't clearly hear or see what is coming, they just feel it. They are running around searching for protection, looking for insurance. Here comes this prophet, John that calls for repentance and the sign of baptism.

They are tired of being scared and submit to John's baptism looking for a divine fix for their flaws so they can move on and feel better. But they don't find instant peace and assurance. John's message leaves them on the hot seat. They know that something must change, but the answer is not obvious to them.

The problems of the people in John's day are not any different than what we experience today. John's call is to NOT JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING! It is an act of piety, a practice of being the faith community.

We live in a time that is so mixed up. Why is feeding and clothing the poor the "Good Fruit" that God is looking for us to express? These are signs that we are not working solo in this world. We are interconnected and interdependent on one another.

If there are those you can care for, then care for them. If there are those who need grace, then show grace.

If this is the time of preparing for Christ in our hearts and lives, how do I make certain, that my heart, mind and spirit are open to God's good news and presence among us?

Tax collectors, public servants: Do your job, but don't take advantage of your authority and responsibilities.

Soldiers: Be ready to defend and protect, but don't mis-use your power and trust.

Whatever the work/job: Contribute to the good of the community, work hard, do some type of work or volunteer efforts.

The task for all is to act on our faith in the community. DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

If you see a mess, clean it up!

DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

If you see someone who is voiceless, give them a voice!

DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

If you find someone who is forgotten, remember them!

DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

If you see the speck in the eyes of others, can you see the log in your own eye?

DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

If you are so certain that you don't want to see the world's least, last and lost, then we become the snakes. If you think you are in the God Squad, ask God if you actually are? If you are ready to kick someone out, make sure you know you are "in."

DON'T JUST STAND THERE—DO SOMETHING!

AMEN.