

"Close to Home: A Home for All"
Luke 3:1-14

On November 20th of this year, we had our last Gospel of Mark Bible study at church. As I was walking into the church, a man carrying a little travel bag asked if we could help him. His car had broken down and he had no place to stay. He needed to get to Texas where he had relatives who could help him. The man had clearly fallen on hard times and so I told him to wait inside the church while I finished the Bible study. Luckily, the Little Free volunteers were working in the kitchen and ended up helping Milo get some food and shelter for the night. The next day, Milo was still stuck in Batavia trying to find a bus ticket to get to Texas. He walked all the way to the church to seek help. This time, David Blake and Jim Morasco helped him get food and shelter. They spent a good part of their afternoon and evening doing research to get him a bus ticket. This was just the day before Thanksgiving and there seemed to be no tickets available. But instead of just walking away from the pain of the whole situation, David and Jim went back to church and did some more research and were finally able to get a bus ticket for the following day. The next morning, they made sure that Milo had food and some supplies to get him through the three-day trip. What motivated David and Jim to do this work?

Here is what Jim had to say: "For me, there's no greater thing we can do on this earth than to feel the pain of others and try our best to alleviate it. Call it what you want, compassion, empathy, an understanding that I too could be in that same situation someday – I can't turn away. It's what drew me into human services years ago and eventually into ministry. My mother once told me I was "born with the empathy gene". I look at myself as just an ordinary man, no better or worse than the next person. I feel privileged when the opportunity presents itself to serve others. For me, it's not "what would Jesus do" but rather; "how can I be more like Jesus".

David to share about the experience: By hanging around the church office as much as I do, I get to see a lot of people come to our church and ask for help of some kind. It could be money to purchase gas for their vehicle, or a downpayment on an apartment, money for transportation to some location – all kinds of requests. In most cases we are very open to helping the individual, while being very cautious with the Help Funds that you so generously donate. We never give the individual the cash for these requests, but instead take them to the gas station and fill their vehicle, or meet with their landlord to provide a deposit, or hand the money to the transportation driver.

After the Little Free Pantry volunteers were able to place "Milo" in lodging the night of the 20th, we assumed he was able to get transportation as he said he needed to get to the train station and from there to Texas. So we were surprised to see him that next day at church in the late afternoon. He was hungry again, so we fed him a couple of soup cans from the Salvation Army food box. I asked him if we got him a ride to the train station, which would have been in Rochester or Buffalo, did he have money to purchase a ticket? He did not, so Jim and I began to explore options to get him a bus ticket from Batavia. Of course, this was approaching a very busy Thanksgiving weekend, so it took a lot of searching. But we were able to get him a ticket for a bus that left that next morning. I took him back to the same hotel he stayed in the night before and Jim picked him up at 8:30 the next morning to drop him off at the bus station near the thruway. Jim also gave him

some money to purchase food along the way as he left on Wednesday and was not scheduled to arrive in Texas until late Saturday! By Saturday I was imagining the joy that he and his family were experiencing as he finally made it to his destination. We certainly did not know his circumstance or why he was in cold western New York when he wanted to be in much warmer Texas. Milo was truly appreciative of the care and generosity of our church and possibly decided to stop in because of our sign out from that reads God Loves Everyone! It was especially meaningful to me to share the love of God on a Thanksgiving weekend!

To speak about the issues of homelessness is one thing but to meet someone with the threat of sleeping on the street in cold weather hits home for us. Even though we could hardly understand Milo and imagine his circumstances, there was a deep bond of compassion that David and Jim felt. The challenge for our world is to look at the plight of those who suffer not just in the broad strokes of issues and labels, but in the compassionate caring of our deep bonds of humanity.

Today, we look at a prophet from the Bible who took to heart the suffering of others and worked hard to call others to compassion and care. Part of the challenge for him and for his people is how normal suffering and exploitation were. People just accepted the conditions around them. But not John the Baptizer, the cousin of Jesus, who prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus. John was captured by a divine vision of justice in the world. His life in the wilderness allowed God's grace to shape his dreams for his community. Prophets in the biblical traditions are not people who predict the future. Instead, they are people who see the present moment through God's eyes and speak God's vision into the world. They are not fortunetellers. They are instead divine vision and truth tellers. That is what is often missing from our world. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann once wrote a whole book about the importance of the prophetic imagination through which we can imagine the world through God's eyes. Brueggemann wrote, "The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus, every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."

That is why John the Baptizer was seen as a major threat by the leaders of his time. He was moved by compassion and by God's vision to call others to repent from the ways of injustice and to imagine the world as God has created and continues to create it to be. John knew that people are capable of more love and compassion. But the status quo around him was so strong, as it normally is, that he had to stir things up in order to get the attention of people who were comfortable with reality as it was.

John confronted the powers and principalities of his day: the Roman Empire, the immoral rulers of his region, and the corrupt religious leadership of the temple in Jerusalem. In fact, his ministry was conducted outside the halls of power in the wilderness so that he could be detached from the values of corruption in his day. His words were not gentle because he wanted the people listening to him to pay attention to the grave situation in which they were living. What is amazing is that John's call to repentance and change was something which the people liked and welcomed in their lives. It rang true in their hearts that they wanted to know what to do. Let's listen to Luke 3:1-14:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler^[a] of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler^[b] of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler^[c] of Abilene, ²during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even now the axe 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.'

¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' 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.' ¹² Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' ¹³ He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' 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.'

John had a grand vision for what community would be like and people loved it. They asked him to instruct them on how to implement the vision. He responded with specific suggestions. The first step is being compassionate and caring about the poor (share coats, share food). The second step is to be ethical and just in their daily dealings (don't collect more money than prescribed). The third step is not to lust for wealth (be satisfied

with your wages). These were not really radical teachings, but what was radical is that John practiced these teachings himself. He let go of his status of power and privilege as the son of a priest to demonstrate a different way of being. What John was interested in was justice and equality, practically acted out. It is also interesting to note that the people who asked John the questions were not known for their high moral standards. Tax collectors were Jews appointed by Rome to collect the taxes, but they could name their own price, pay the taxes out of what they had collected and legally keep the remainder for themselves. It was rare in those days to hear of an honest tax collector. Soldiers also used their position to intimidate people and to accept bribes. Both professions provided an ideal way to become wealthy at the expense of the people. But even those people who seemed hopeless because they lived by the corrupt standards of greed and empire, the good news reached them and transformed them to people who were caring and compassionate. And all of this was possible because of the life, ministry, and teachings of one man! And that is why the Gospel writer decided that it was important to share his story as well as Jesus' story. Stories of people like that inspire us and call us to a higher level of goodness and faith.

When we imagine living close to our home in God, the invitation is to see the potential for all of God's children to have the opportunity to have a home of peace and justice. Last week we talked about the idea of being a secret Santa of blessing, sharing our blessings with others which recognizes the divine in others. Today, the image of a safe and healthy home is something that extends that blessings and compassion to all. We may not have the voice and charisma of John the Baptizer, but in our own ways, we can help others in our lives to tap into their own God's given gifts of compassion.

The art image by Rev. Denise Anderson for this week is a depiction of John the Baptist in the likeness of a modern-day prophet, Elias Chacour. This is what Anderson wrote about the image: "As I meditated on the theme, Close to Home, I decided that what makes a place 'home' for me is people. That realization informed my decision to explore this theme through portraiture—the depiction of people. The references for each of the depictions I've painted are actual Palestinians and Israelis. It's important to me to bring this ancient story truly close to home as we consider the current geopolitical realities in the land of the Advent story. I encourage you to read more about the stories of those who inspired these depictions.

My depiction of John the Baptist is inspired by Abuna (meaning "Father") Elias Chacour, who was the Archbishop of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church (2006-2014). A Palestinian Arab-Israeli, Abuna Chacour is a well-respected activist and educator who established the Mar Elias Educational Institutions in Ibillin, which educate students of multiple religious backgrounds—Arab and Israeli—from kindergarten through high school. His life's work embodies the courageous and prophetic pointing to a better way that I also see in John the Baptist.

John's words in the text are so full of imagery that it's impossible to fit it all in one image. The shape of his tunic recalls the base of the tree referenced in verse 9. In the background is an obvious path, recalling John's clear instruction to his listeners. Share your belongings! Do not extort people! His counsel is so simple, yet apparently so hard to follow. The path leads to the sunrise on a new day, the colors of which allude to the fire of Jesus' baptism. In his hand is a key, which is a symbol that you'll see in my other works.

For Palestinians, the key represents a longing and determination to return home from displacement.”

What divine dream or vision for a home for all is stirring in your heart these days? The winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, began her orphanage with such a vision. She told her superiors, "I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage." A dream and three pennies were enough for Mother Teresa to risk everything and to trust God's leading. "Mother Teresa," her superiors chided gently, "you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies...with three pennies you can't do anything." "I know," she said, smiling, "but with God and three pennies I can do anything." May we have that kind of imagination and that kind of trust with God! Amen.