

Between Here and There - Luke 3: 7-18  
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond  
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska  
December 13, 2009

For 12 years I was the pastor of a UCC/Disciples of Christ congregation in the Seattle area. I managed to become involved in a variety of organizations, but one of the places where I spent much time was the local hospital. I made many visits to patients there.

I was also an active participant in the Ministerial Association, and one of the ministries of the Association was to rotate the responsibility of Chaplain at that same hospital. When it was my time I would get occasional calls from the hospital telling me of someone who wanted a pastor to have a prayer with them, perhaps prior to entering surgery, someone who did not have a church home. Of course, I would go and have prayer with those people.

One day I received a call for my help for a young single woman who had given birth to a girl who lived only a few hours. The mother was terribly young and had no family to be with and support her. When I arrived, she lay in bed and had a stare going into the ceiling. I did not know what to expect or say and I could not imagine what she was feeling. Soon I asked her if she would like a prayer and she replied kindly but followed with something that sent shivers through me. "My baby died and there is not much I can do for her anymore," she said. Once again expecting to be asked for a prayer for her baby, she asked me to do something that caught me by complete surprise. "I want you to baptize her," she said.

I don't know what you think about baptism, but I had never considered it for anyone but the living. All kinds of responses rushed through my mind. I could tell her about a loving God who already welcomed her baby into eternity. Or, how baptism was a sacrament for the living as they enter Christian life, or that I did not think that would be a good thing to do. I thought all those thoughts but out of my mouth came a "yes, I will baptize your baby." In my theological mind it knew it to be unnecessary, but I also knew that this woman needed to do something for her baby. I was taken to the morgue and a hospital person placed the dead baby in my arms and I baptized her. At that moment I

didn't care how theologically unnecessary or incorrect it was. What I knew was that a young mother needed to do something for her baby, and baptizing was the only gift left for her to give. I baptized the child and was glad I did it.

John was baptizing people in the Jordan River when he looked up and saw a group of important religious figures. He knew they were not there for any reason other than to buy an insurance policy, and with that he said: "*who warned you bunch of snakes?*" Being baptized for them was nothing more than an attempt to cover their back in the event that John was right and they were wrong. For those men, baptizing was nothing more than a self-serving moment to ensure themselves of an escape from judgment. With them, there was not an ounce of love for anything or anyone beyond themselves, which is why John called them "*a bunch of snakes.*"

As we approach Christmas, John's message is especially poignant. He tells us that being baptized is not for anything less than your love for others beyond yourself. Baptism isn't about you. It isn't about what you are going to get. Baptism, John tells us, is getting ready for the one to follow. The one who will place huge demands upon you and your years. The one who will point to an entirely new way that people see and care for each other. Baptism is the beginning but *Between Here and There* much will unfold. The bottom line is this: expect to pay a high price for your willingness to claim the name Christian.

Eschatology is a theological term that is often used to describe "the end of time." Unfortunately, much of the Christian world has evolved into an eschatological belief that we are all about preparing for the "end of time." The word "eschatology" is corrupted with such definition. The word "eschaton" can be understood a "purpose" and "future." All that John started, and Jesus continued, is not about the "end of time," but is about the purpose of the future. The purpose of the future isn't about destruction. The purpose of the future is for us, and this world, to become what we were created to be. But to get from here to there we need to make some changes, and the important religious people that came to be baptized were not there to be part of the changes. There were there to protect their backs and that is why John called them "snakes."

Fred Craddock tells the story of the Biannual Assembly of the Christian Church that was held in Las Vegas some years ago. He hailed a taxicab in front

of the hotel. The cab driver asked if he was “one of those preachers?” Craddock said, “yea, I guess I am.” With that, the driver went into a tirade. “I am a Roman Catholic and my wife and I go to mass and so do our kids. We’re a Catholic family and so are our kids so if you want to convert someone, get another cab.”

Craddock said, “I just want a ride to the convention center.” To which the cab driver said, “I have had four people try to convert me this morning and I’m tired of it.”

Oh how awful that such is what so many Christians have denigrated the Christian faith into. How awful that so many Christians believe that the right way to live faithfully is to participate in that kind of activity. That is not what baptism is about. That isn’t what Christian faith or life is about. Being faithful is being prepared and willing to pay the high cost of discipleship. It is a willingness to confront evil: evil that prevents the purpose of the future to unfold.

Jurgen Moltmann is a German theologian. As a teenager he was drafted into the German army and sent to the front lines. He surrendered to the first British soldiers he encountered. As a prisoner of war he was held for several years. It was while in a British prisoner of war camp that he first learned of the atrocities committed by the German people. He was horrified by it and wished for his own death. More followed but in time he became a Christian and theologian. He helped develop the Confessing Church in Germany, and wrote a great deal. In 2000 he was given the Grawemeyer Award in Religion for his book *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Here is what Moltmann wrote:

*“Eschatology is an image that puts forth a vision of the world about to come, of God’s vision for the new world...It goes right to the root and exposes the lies of the crowd. It calls for a radical understanding of faith...Faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes, not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man.”*

That is the message of Jesus that was introduced by John. That is what baptism is about. It is about being given a glimpse, regardless of how small it is, of the purpose of the future, and if one does not shed the selfish, self-centered hopes and dreams that we are too often encouraged to embrace, then it is impossible to embrace the purpose of the

future. Rev Kenneth E. Kovacs of Catonsville Presbyterian Church in Maryland said it this way:

*“One cannot accept this vision of the kingdom and then wish to return to life as usual. One must ‘bear fruit.’”*

*Between Here and There* it is impossible to know either how long it will be or what it will be. What we can be certain of is this: *Between Here and There*, our faithfulness will be challenged. The only thing we must decide is this: what will we be faithful to?

Amen.