



“The Power to See It Through”

Luke 3:15-22

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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Baptism of the Lord

There's something about power, privilege and success that distorts vision and corrupts morals. The CEO of a Fortune 500 company told me that success was the worst thing that ever happened to his company. "Success made us arrogant," he said, "and it made us blind to changes all around us in our industry."

Power and privilege corrupt morals and erode character. The list of contemporary examples is vast. This morning I scanned the main section of the *Times* and found several up-to-date instances. The main story on the front page tells of a federal agency of the United States which is entrusted with the care of vulnerable people. It seems the agency has permitted harm to come to those in their care and has systematically lied to cover it up.

The International section tells of a political leader in Europe who is described as a morally rigorous legislator. According to the story the official, who is sixty-years-old, had an affair with a nineteen-year-old, gave the teenager money and lied to cover it all up. The scandal threatens the stability of that nation.

Power, privilege and success are blinding and corrupting. How else do you explain bishops of the church who protect priests who abuse children – children who are in their care? Lives and parishes have been destroyed, the name of Christ has been defamed – and the perpetrators are protected from the consequences of their criminal actions. The moral blindness is mind-boggling.

Power and privilege seem to create a deficit in both self-perception and the capacity for self-criticism. It seems that many who possess great success or power create an alternative moral universe for themselves. The rules, even the laws, of ordinary society no longer apply. Up is down, and wrong is deemed right. All of reality and the facts of life are rearranged to fit the preferred point of view. Feedback deafness stifles perception. And in the end, the great ones of our world tend to lose any sense of what their actions do to others. Often they don't care.

Reformers are routinely stonewalled, rejected and punished for their troubles. Take an example from long ago. The suffragists of the 19th century worked for what is now considered a basic civil right – the right to vote. Their cause was just, but it took a generation of abuse, suffering, and rejection before the powers-that-be gave way and conceded that women possessed the simple democratic right to vote. What now seems simple, basic and just, once seemed outrageous to the powerful.

All of us, especially the powerful, tend to rearrange reality to suit our needs, desires and life-styles. We all interpret life, politics, society, religion and the world from a particular

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point of view – our own. We make up our minds about things and accumulate evidence to support our pre-determined conclusions.

The human capacity for self-deception is enormous. It leads to jaw-dropping behavior that seems so regular these days, it isn't so jaw-dropping any more. How many times have we read the headlines and wanted to say, "What were you thinking?"

It's not just the rich and famous who deceive themselves and create their own moral systems. All of us share the tendency to rearrange reality to suit our own needs and resist attempts to reform us. We need help, and we need to be accountable to someone besides ourselves.

I have a theologian friend who says that the old Christian doctrine of original sin has a powerful corollary. You know about original sin. All of us, without exception, are born with the overpowering tendency to corrupt morals. We all rebel against our parents, against moral good sense and ultimately, we resist God. We are all sinners, that is certainly true.

My friend says the corollary to that is the doctrine of original stupidity. We all bear the capacity to do really stupid things. Some of us engage in jaw-dropping stupidity. And I must add, my friend says original stupidity is especially visited on the clergy. We are equally stupid.

Our Gospel Lesson offers help. It's the story of a reformer, a powerful, privileged and morally stupid man. The story ends with the promise of a new day when human behavior will be set right.

John the Baptist was the reformer. His story is more than a pious bible story from long ago. Luke roots John's story deep in the soil of real life in the real world. Listen to Luke's introduction to the story,

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John....

In a very real world of corruption and moral blindness, God had a word to say. That word was simple: It's time for a change. God is on the way with a moral and spiritual revolution. That demands change – a change that begins on the inside out and alters everything. "Repent," John cried, "and be baptized" as a sign of that repentance.

That old religious word, "repent," conjures up in many people some vivid images, long ago rejected. For many, the word "repent," evokes sweaty preachers and weeping sinners. Others see a man marching up Fifth Avenue wearing a sandwich board that says "repent" and crying out in judgment. When I was a boy, we used to drive by a huge boulder on the side of the road on which was painted in large letters, "repent."

John's message of repentance is much different - and simpler. The Greek word for repent is two words made into one. Literally translated, it means, "Change your mind." See the world in a new way. Alter your point of view. Change your mind about God, yourself and the world.

Hebrew, the language of John and Jesus, paints word pictures. The word for repent, "*shuv*," means "turn around." Change your direction. Turn around and head toward God and God's ways.

The point is clear and direct. Things in the world need to change. If the world is ever to be what it's intended by God to be, things have to change. We need to change.

John the Baptist's message of repentance is quite subversive. His hearers wanted some moral wiggle room so they asked him what repentance meant for them. John replied, "It's simple. Those of you who have two coats, give one to someone who has no coat. If you have food, share it with the hungry." The haves are morally bound to help the have-nots in the community. Self-interest needs to give way to generous sharing with the needy.

Some tax collectors had reason for moral negotiation. Back then tax collectors were not the IRS. They were entrepreneurs, small business owners, who contracted with Rome to collect taxes. Rome collected a flat fee and the collectors took what they could get. Needless to say, they overbilled, skimmed from the top and, in general, took advantage of those under their power at every opportunity. Most became wealthy at the expense of others.

John told them they needed dramatic change. "Stop cheating," he said. "And stop using your power for personal gain." Their greed had to halt at the edge of justice – and their neighbors' welfare. The trajectory of their lives and their heart's desires had to be reversed.

Some soldiers, likely mercenaries in the employ of the temple, chimed in. How do we turn our lives around? John told them to stop abusing their power. "Stop the violence," John said. "Stop using your power to fleece the weak. Ordinary citizens do not exist to supplement your meager incomes or to serve your needs."

All three examples of repentance have a common thread that runs directly into the teaching of Jesus. The gospel calls on us to renounce the self-interest that motivates us and makes us susceptible to moral blindness. Martin Luther said we are all bent inward on ourselves, and the gospel intends to bend us outward toward others.

John radicalizes the command to love our neighbor. He calls us to live to share ourselves and our possessions with others. Jesus put it more radically – at least to people of power and privilege – "sell what you have and give to the poor." That is a good diagnostic command – it reveals us for what we are. Jesus put it differently, but still radically, to ordinary folks, "deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me."

That is not easy, nor was it intended to be easy. It wasn't easy back then, and Jesus' disciples, the early church, and we have been negotiating with Jesus ever since. Every generation risks accommodating the demand of the gospel to its own self-image.

John will not let us off the hook. "If the world is ever going to be what God intends it to be, we have to change our minds and change direction." When, however, a community of Christian disciples becomes committed to doing the right thing rather than the expedient thing, when we center our lives on helping others, when we develop the capacity to speak the truth and hear the truth, when we see the world through the lens of the gospel – then, and only then, we and things do change. We are a people in the process of changing our minds and turning our lives toward God. It takes a lifetime. It's never easy.

Just when John and his preaching are succeeding wonderfully, Luke interrupts his story by mentioning old King Herod.

Herod, son of the infamous Herod the Great, the tyrant who murdered the children of Bethlehem, heard about John's popular movement. The Jewish historian Josephus had a lot to say about Herod and John the Baptist. He reports that Herod was threatened by John's popularity and feared a revolt.

Luke writes that Herod also didn't want to hear the truth about his moral life. Years earlier, on a trip to Rome, Herod fell madly in love with his brother's wife. They ran off together, divorced their spouses and lived unhappily ever after. John the Baptist reminded Herod that the law of God says it's never a good idea to sleep with your brother's wife. Frankly, it's just common sense.

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Herod and his new wife Herodias were not amused by the desert prophet's denunciation. They clapped John in chains, threw him in jail, and later executed him.

Luke's point seems to be a foreshadowing of what is to come. Jesus will also rile the powers-that-be with the truth, and he, too, was executed for telling the truth. When the good news of God is planted in the real world, our world, it meets serious resistance. Power is dangerous and the human heart is remarkably stubborn.

The gospel always challenges the status quo and culture always resists reform. Every culture has adjusted the word of God to fit its needs. We are no different.

A third item in this morning's *Times* caught my eye. The obituary page reported the death of 98-year-old Freya von Moltke. Ms. Von Moltke was the last surviving member of the Kreisau Group, a conspiracy of well-connected Germans who plotted the assassination of Adolph Hitler.

It caught my eye because I'm preparing to teach a course on the life and influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was also a member of the Kreisau Group. With rare insight and long before most of his contemporaries, Bonhoeffer discerned the sinister nature of German National Socialism and Adolph Hitler. A young theologian, Bonhoeffer accused the Nazis of heresy, a "systemic breaking of the first commandment." The Nazis made nation and race the highest good, even a god to be worshipped. A majority of the German Church bought into the heresy.

Bonhoeffer protested mightily to no avail. As the years rolled on, the heresy became more pervasive and in the end, even the Confessing Church, which early on had resisted Hitler, capitulated. Bonhoeffer, abandoned by his own church, cast his lot with the conspiracy. He believed that his nation must die in order to be redeemed, and he willingly gave his life in that cause. He was executed just days before Germany's liberation was complete.

Some things are worth dying for, Jesus said. Bonhoeffer, along with others, believed the truth will set you free.

Into this sad story of self-deception, destruction and death comes a promise. It's the promise that a power beyond ourselves is at work and will change people and the world. No sooner does Luke mention the evil genius Herod and the arrest of John, than Jesus walks into story.

Jesus stood on the edge of the crowd, listened to John's message, and watched the people being baptized. When the baptisms were finished, Jesus offered himself to John to be baptized. He joined the reform movement and identified with the new community being formed by God to change the world.

In Luke, Jesus' act of baptism is almost an afterthought. It is in a dependant clause at the end of a sentence. The focus is on what Jesus' baptism meant to him and to the world.

Coming up from the water, he heard a voice, "You are my beloved child." Jesus went into his world-changing ministry with the assurance he was God's beloved child deep in his soul. It sustained him through it all.

Jesus also saw the Holy Spirit descend from heaven in the form of a dove. God's Spirit touched Jesus and equipped and empowered him for the rigors of his ministry. Jesus went from his baptism, Luke tells us, "in the power of the Spirit." In the assurance of his calling as God's child and in the power of the Spirit, Jesus began God's work on earth that is still changing the world.

In our baptism, God speaks those same words, "You are my beloved child." Baptism provides us with the Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out and to equip us for the rigors of life in the real world.

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And baptism places us in a community of God's dearly loved children who live in the truth and who are empowered by God's Spirit. We are learning to repent – to turn to God in love and to serve our neighbors in that same love.

We need each other if we are to hear the truth and to fight off the corruption of power, success and wealth. I know I do.

I know I suffer from original stupidity and that I cannot trust myself much of the time. Therefore, years ago, I committed myself to a small group of peers. For over thirty years, none of us has made a major decision without checking with the others. We stay in contact, and we tell each other the truth, even when it is difficult. I also have another larger group that I occasionally ask to counsel me in some of the big issues of life.

God gives us each other to save us from ourselves. And God gives us the Holy Spirit to give us the courage to hear the truth and do the right thing. It all began long, long ago by a muddy stream in the desert, when Jesus Christ joined us in baptism and promised to change us along the journey.

Amen

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