

The Kin-dom: It's About Equity
Luke 3:1-6
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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“Prepare the way of the Lord!” We hear these words and, if we know the Christian story, especially at this time of year, we are likely to think of John the Baptist.

John is one of two who we are first introduced to in Luke 1, before they are even born. Alongside Mary, Jesus' mother, another woman is pregnant – her relative, Elizabeth. In fact, Elizabeth's pregnancy is also a big deal. Not only is she an older woman considered barren, but when the angel Gabriel announces to her husband that she will have a child, he says that this child will turn people toward God and prepare people for the coming of the Lord.

It is this baby, who we later come to know as John, who is said to have leapt in his mother's womb upon hearing the greeting of Mary when they were both pregnant. It is this baby, a relative of Jesus, who grows up to be the one who foreshadows Jesus, who announces Jesus, who prepares the way for Jesus.

And often when we read the passage we heard today we really just read past it. There are the first two verses which set the context – the time and place. We definitely tend to read past those, after all this is a time and place with which most of us are hardly familiar. So, we just hear them as a generic marker – something that meant something once but that we tend to ignore today. Something that if we're interested, can tell us more about the time and place of the story, but which we largely don't pause with.

Then we read on to the verses that introduce John and tell us what he was doing. But again, we tend to quickly read past them. When we know the story, we tend to want to get to Jesus. And so, we simply nod our heads in acknowledgement of John's existence. We give him

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a brief pat on the back for doing his job well, for “handing off the baton” so to speak, and stepping into the background as Jesus stepped into the foreground.

John is usually, for us, merely a path to get to Jesus.

And yet today our scripture doesn't get us that far. It doesn't introduce Jesus. Instead it asks us to be present in the situation in which John's, and later Jesus', ministry was happening. It asks us to recognize John as a person, not a mere prop. And it asks us to hear what was already an old story of expectation about what God was preparing to do in their midst.

See, we don't want to miss the fact that while this passage gives us a context, while it introduces us to John and his ministry, while it sets the stage for Jesus, it does even more. In quoting Isaiah, the Gospel of Luke reminds us that the expectation of the coming of God's kingdom was an old expectation...long waited for...deeply wanted.

So today, as we continue to explore this idea of the kin-dom of God...and, let's remember this is a new metaphor for many of us that helps to point the way to God's intentions for this world. This is a metaphor that asks us to set aside “kingdom” language – language that is not only patriarchal and archaic in our hearing, but language that can leave us assuming that God just wants different leadership in the same old structure. So, the language of kin-dom instead of kingdom reminds us that the intention of God, that the world which God created isn't just about keeping a hierarchical, top-down structure with new leaders, but is about a total changing of structures and expectations and ways to we relate to each other.

Last week, with Tammy, you all explored the “kin” part of that – what it means to live in this world as if all of us – every single human – are kin, family, from the same womb...what it means to live as if each person bears the same value as those closest to us, those we care deeply for, those we would give our lives for.

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This week we continue to ask questions about what it means to live in and to help bring about God's kin-dom as we look at this text, particularly at the implications when we lay verses 1 and 2, that recitation of power and position, down next to the quote from Isaiah...words that bring an image of a new system, a new way of being, not only personally but structurally.

See, maybe verses 1 and 2 aren't only about positioning this story in history. They seem also to be a reminder to us of the world in which John and Jesus were living, a world identified by who was in charge and who held what positions of power...a world in which it was important to know who was who, who held the power, and who you shouldn't challenge or cross.

Into that context came John, the one called to prepare the way for Jesus, the one called to take some new first steps toward ushering in the kin-dom. He came and in our reading today, the description of him was borrowed from old words from the prophet Isaiah. Words that were not focused on the powers that be, not focused on the list of who's who in government leadership, but focused on a leveling out of the playing field. This image from Isaiah paints a strong picture of the entire landscape, the entire system within which the people were living being changed.

And we have to read past a cursory reading in order to realize this. We have to remember that these words, first from Isaiah, came to a people who were in exile but they came as words that assumed them that exile was nearly over, that they would be delivered from their current situation, that God was still present.

See, these images of valleys being lifted and mountains being leveled aren't just about the landscape. And that's important for us to know. After all, if we hear it only about physical landscape, then we might ask why God's intention would be for a world that resembles western Nebraska. We love the differences – from Iowa's rolling hills captured so well in Grant Wood's paintings to the steep terrain of the Rockies. We love the highs and the lows. But we are able to

love them as we drive along in our reliable vehicles on paved roads. See, while we love the beauty of the highs and lows, we forget that this idea of the leveling out would have been a welcome relief for the Biblical people who were walking everywhere they went, who at best could travel 20 miles in a day. So, for them even if it was just about the landscape, that would have been a gift.

And yet *they* realized what we, who are part of the dominant culture, often forget - that it was about so much more. This image isn't about changing topography but rather this is about changing the systems that were impacting every part of their lives.

It is no accident that when we hear these verses in Luke, they are preceded by a litany who's who in the hierarchy, who is not to be challenged. But then, this passage moves on to this image of lows being brought high, highs being brought low and everyone put on the same, stable footing. Again, not just about topography, but about power and oppression, about wealth and poverty.

So, what is this kin-dom that God is working to bring about? What is this kin-dom that God invites us to help create and to help usher in? It is a world where we live in relationship with all people and all creation in such a way that we've got each other's backs just as we would for our closest relatives.

It is also a world in which equity is a priority.

But, what is equity?

See, we are more likely to use the word equality rather than equity, and if we look around and are honest about the lack of equality, sometimes that seems like a great enough challenge.

But equity asks us to take it even a step further.

Look at this picture. Here there are two similar images, but do you notice the differences? The first box shows equality. Three people of different sizes all looking over the same fence and being given the same boxes to stand on in order to see over. They are treated equally. The problem is the shorter one still can't see.

So, then we move to the second image. This one shows equity. In it we see that it is not the boxes that are the same, not that the same assistance is given. Rather, the thing that is the same is the position in which they all end up. So, the shorter person gets a bigger box and, in that act, they all end up in the same position and they can all see.

Equity is about fairness. It's about making sure people get access to the same opportunities. Sometimes our differences and/or history can create barriers to participation so we must ensure equity before we can enjoy equality.¹ And if we are honest that means more than giving the appropriate sized boxes, it means changing the system, removing the fence, so that all can be a part of the kin-dom.

And if we were to keep reading in the Gospel of Luke, we would hear this. While chapter 3 begins with the naming of those in power – the reality of the system in which they live – it moves on and by verse 11, after being asked by the crowd what they should do, John replies saying, “It you have two coats, give one away...if you have enough food, share...don't take more than you need...be satisfied with what you have.”

When we look at the idea of the kin-dom of God – from the words of Isaiah to the work of John the Baptist, from the life of Jesus to our lives today – we are reminded that as people of

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faith, as people who claim to follow in the ways of Jesus and to love God, we are asked to be co-creators with God in the bringing about of a kin-dom where all are valued and where the playing field is leveled so that all have the opportunities to enjoy the fullness of life and love.

May it be so.